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35. Sequel

Allegiances

[image]

Key
[T] Previously ThunderClan
[S] Previously ShadowClan
[R] Previously RiverClan

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws [T]
Deputy-Brambleclaw: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes [T]
Advisors-
-Whitestorm: big white tom [T]
-Blackfoot: white tom with black paws [S]
-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat [R]
Healers-
-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom [R]
-Runningnose: small gray and white tom [S]
Warriors-
-Frostfur: white she-cat with blue eyes [T]
-Oakfur: small brown tom [S]
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat [T]
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat [S]
-Blackclaw: smoky black tom [R]
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks [S]
-Stonefur: gray tom with battle-scarred ears [R]
-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat [R]
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes [T]
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom [S]
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat [S]
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom [T]
-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat [T]
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom [S]
-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat [S]
-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws [S]

-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat [T]
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes [T]
-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom [T]
-Loudbelly: dark brown tom [R]
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat [S]
-Swiftwind: black and white tom [T]
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Ashfang: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes [T]
-Rainwhisker: black tom [T]
-Sorreltail: tortoiseshell and white she-cat [T]
-Cedartail: dark brown tabby tom [S]
-Rowanclaw: ginger tabby tom [S]
-Tawnypelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [T]
-Stormblaze: dark gray tom with amber eyes [R]
-Owlgaze: light brown tabby tom with green eyes
-Hopeflame: long-haired russet she-cat with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes

Apprentices-

-Maplepaw: ginger and white she-cat (mentor: Runningnose)
-Ravenpaw: black tom (mentor: Ashfang) [S]
-Cloverpaw: black and white she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Brambleclaw) [S]
-Hollypaw: light gray and white tabby she-cat (mentor: Dawncloud) [S]
-Hailpaw blue-grey tom with amber eyes (mentor: Blackclaw) [R]
-Dewpaw: dark gray she-cat with white flecks and amber eyes (mentor: Thornclaw) [R]
-Turtlepaw: brown tom with golden swirled-stripes (mentor: Mousefur) [R]
-Shimmerpaw: pale gray she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Mosspelt) [R]

Queens-

-Darkflower: black she-cat (mother to Runningwind's kits: Ebonykit, Pinekit, and Smallkit) [S]
-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat (expecting Jaggedtooth's kits) [T]
-Ferncloud: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes (expecting Dustpelt's kits) [T]
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches (expecting

Swiftwind's kits) [T]
-Featherstream: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (expecting Owlgaze's kits) [R]
Kits-
-Ebonykit: pure black tom (mother: Darkflower)
-Smallkit: very small tabby she-kit with white paws (mother: Darkflower)
-Pinekit: russet tabby tom (mother: Darkflower)

WindClan
Leader-Tallstar: black and white tom with a long tail
Deputy-Deadfoot: black tom with twisted paw
Medicine Cat-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom
Warriors-
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom
-Ashfoot: gray tabby she-cat
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat
-Tornear: tabby tom
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom
-Whitetail: small white she-cat
-Gorsefur: long-legged brown tabby tom
-Crowfeather: black tom with blue eyes
-Skybreeze: blue-grey she-cat
-Cloudpool: white tom
Apprentices-
-Eaglepaw: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail & white face (mentor: Onewhisker)
-Soarpaw: black and white she-kit with blue eyes (mentor: Breezetail)
Queens-
-Morningflower: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat (expecting Onewhisker's kits)
Kits-None
Elders-None

Cats Outside the Clans
-Barley: black and white tom that lives on a farm close to the forest
-Ravenpaw: sleek black cat who lives on the farm with Barley

-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat
-Free: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes
-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-cat
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-cat with white paws (expecting Oliver's kits)
-Oliver: pale gray tabby tom

Prologue

[image]

The forest whispered with the sounds of the wind passing through he leaves. Sunlight broke through the thick forest canopy to rest on the forest floor. In the distance, the sound of water moving against the Stepping Stones could be heard.

Through the shadows of the forest, four cats moved silently. Their eyes reflected the sunlight which caused them to glow. It was early sunrise and a thin fog clung in the air. A slight chill was also in the air, causing the four cats to puff out their thick pelts.

In the lead of the patrol was a large white tom. The rest of the patrol was made up of a black and white tom, a delicate tabby she-cat, and a pale ginger tabby she-cat. They moved along an invisible line, marking and moving on.

The pale ginger she-cat pricked her ears and looked across the border at the river, and beyond that, the RiverClan border. She squinted her pale green eyes and blinked in surprise when she noticed a flash of gray fur. Her heart skipped a beat and she stepped out of the cover of the forest to get a better look.

"Sandstorm?" The white tom turned to ask her. His yellow eyes were filled with slight concern.

She shook her head, "Go on ahead without me, Whitestorm. I want to just check on something." The white tom studied her but then slowly nodded. He moved along to catch up with the rest of the group, leaving Sandstorm alone.

With her eyes trained on the other bank, Sandstorm waited. Had she merely imagined it? She sat at the edge of the forest expectantly, but she started to believe that he wouldn't come.

Suddenly, a dark shape appeared from the reeds. The cat slipped into the water and swam across towards her. Sandstorm stood up to

meet the gray cat as he pulled himself from the river. The sight of him soaking wet amused her.

"So, how's RiverClan treating you?" Sandstorm asked the long-haired gray tom. She spoke to him as she would an old friend. His yellow eyes gleamed in amusement and he shook the water from his pelt, letting stray droplets cling to her pelt. "Graystripe!" She gasped.

"It's okay, but I miss ThunderClan." Graystripe admitted, sitting down on the bank. "RiverClan still watches me like a hawk."

Sandstorm pitied him. Their best friend just died and he had to suffer alone. At least in TigerClan she had others that also grieved for Fireheart, the ones who knew he wasn't Bluestar's killer. "Tigerstar's renamed ThunderClan. We're called TigerClan now."

Graystripe stared at her in shock. "Really? And the clan just let him?"

"He killed Cloudpaw," Sandstorm growled, hatred flaring in her green eyes. "He's prepared to kill anyone that steps out of line."

The realization filled Graystripe's yellow eyes. Everything he, Fireheart, and Ravenpaw had feared was becoming real. Tigerstar had taken over ThunderClan and perverted it. Was it really a clan he wanted to return to?

"You should be careful, Graystripe," Sandstorm murmured. "Tigerstar is making you out to be Fireheart's accomplice. The clan sees you as a traitor."

"Let's talk later," Graystripe whispered. "I can meet you somewhere tonight?"

Sandstorm hesitated. Meeting him would be an act of treason, but he was the only one that understood her pain. "Okay, let's meet at Fourtrees."

And with that, Graystripe turned and slipped back into the river. Sandstorm watched him go with a slight pain in her heart. At least he was free of Tigerstar's grip.

~*~

Night finally fell upon the forest. Sandstorm turned in her nest, anxious to leave. The other warriors around her were sleeping soundly, unaware of her. She rose from her nest and peeked out at the clearing.

Longtail guarded the camp entrance and she wondered if she should go through the dirtplace. He didn't need to know where she was going. Sandstorm decided to just leave out the camp entrance.

She exited the warriors den and slunk across camp to Longtail. The warrior seemed surprised to see her awake. "What's wrong Sandstorm?" Longtail wondered out loud in a whisper.

"I can't sleep so I'm going to go for a walk," Sandstorm lied. It surprised her how easy it was to lie.

Longtail nodded, "Take care, Sandstorm."

The pale ginger warrior left out the camp entrance and took off running. She couldn't believe this, she's never broken the Warrior Code in her life! A deep thrill started in her heart and coursed through her blood. It was kind of exciting, being outside at night.

She finally came to Fourtrees and crept into the clearing. The four tall oaks reached high overhead, their canopies blocking out most of Silverpelt. Sandstorm could still see the moon, though, shining brightly.

"Sandstorm?" Graystripe emerged from the shadows, his yellow eyes excited. "Wow, you came."

"I-I needed to talk to someone who doesn't see Fireheart as a traitor." Sandstorm's voice quivered. Why had she come?

Graystripe stepped closer to her and laid his chin atop her head. "I know, it's hard for me too. I miss him."

At first, Sandstorm tensed at his touch, but slowly, she relaxed. Why did she need to act so hostile? This was *Graystripe*, for StarClan's sake! He was Fireheart's best friend, a friend of hers. They trained

together as apprentices! There was no reason for there to be awkwardness between them.

"For one night," Graystripe murmured into her ear. "Let's forget everything. Let's just...*be*." He licked her cheek and Sandstorm tensed again.

"Graystripe, I love Fireheart..." Sandstorm whispered.

The gray tom's yellow gaze hardened. He spoke the cold truth neither of them wanted to admit: "Fireheart's gone."

Sandstorm knew he was right. So she allowed herself, for just one night, to forget everything. She forgot Fireheart, she forgot TigerClan, she forgot the Warrior Code. Heck, she even forgot StarClan. It was easier than she thought with Graystripe to help her.

~*~

One Moon Later

Sandstorm waited by Sunningrocks impatiently. She had slipped away from the clan and would need to return soon. But she couldn't return until she spoke to him. Then he was suddenly there, swimming strongly across the river. She rose from her position in anticipation, waiting for him to be at her side.

Graystripe emerged from the river and shook his pelt somewhat dry. He padded closer to Sandstorm and nuzzled her. "You wanted to speak with me?"

She took a deep breath and remembered how many times she's practiced this. But all that preparing escaped her mind now that he stood before her. "Graystripe, I'm expecting kits."

They stared at one another for the longest time. Neither of them knew what to say. Graystripe spoke first. "That's great news, Sandstorm."

"No, it's not!" Sandstorm hissed. "These kits can never know who their father is! And what if they look like you?! There's no long-haired gray toms in TigerClan!" She spoke bitterly. "This was a

grave mistake."

Graystripe flattened his ears. "How can you say that, Sandstorm? These kits will be a part of you, too. They'll represent everything good that's been taken away from us. They'll be beautiful and good."

Sandstorm's legs felt weak. Everything was happening too quickly! Fireheart's been dead for no longer than a moon and she already developed feelings for another tom. Not to mention this tom also happened to be Fireheart's best friend!

"I'm here for you, Sandstorm. Whenever you need to talk." Graystripe promised.

"No, I'm in this alone, Graystripe." Sandstorm whispered sadly. "I'm the one carrying these kits. I'll be the one kitting them while you'll be comfortably across the river. No one can know you're their father, and we cannot give anyone a reason to suspect it."

Sandstorm turned away and disappeared into the forest. Her heart was broken, and she left part of it with Graystripe.

~*~

One Moon Later

Sandstorm breathed heavily, her body was wracked with pain. She squeezed her eyes shut as the pain rippled across her body. A quarter moon earlier, she had visited Barley's farm. She had asked if she could have her kits there as a precaution. Sandstorm didn't want the clan seeing them until she knew that none of them looked like Graystripe.

At her side now was Butterfly, a sweet she-cat who was a friend of Barley and Ravenpaw. Butterfly was actually expecting Barley's kits. The two toms had left the barn in search of prey. They had also left so she could kit in peace. Around Sandstorm, the sweet smell of the hay calmed her.

"The first kit's almost here," Butterfly meowed.

Sandstorm's screams echoed in the barn as the first kit arrived into

the world. She looked over and a sickening feeling took over her. He was an exact copy of Graystripe. There wasn't much time for her to think about it as the pains returned.

A moment later, and another kit entered the world. This one was another tom, but he looked nothing like Graystripe. He had a light brown tabby pelt.

A few moments later and another kit was born. This one Sandstorm gazed at in amazement. She was a perfect mixture of Graystripe and Sandstorm. Her pelt was a deep russet color and long-haired. Along her spine was a dark dorsal stripe like Graystripe's.

Finally, the last kit was born. This one was a small, dainty she-kit. Her pelt was ginger and white. Sandstorm cleaned of her four kits with the help of Butterfly. She snuggled them against her belly so they could nurse.

"They're beautiful," Butterfly purred.

"The gray tom, I can't take him with me," Sandstorm meowed sadly. The clan would be too suspicious because he looked exactly like his father.

"I'm sure that Barley wouldn't mind if I adopted him," Butterfly purred. "Kits are a precious thing, and this way, you'll know he's safe." She paused for a moment. "What are their names?"

Sandstorm looked down upon her four kits. "The little ginger and white she-kit I'll name Maplekit, the light brown tabby tom is Owlkit." She paused when her gaze moved to the russet she-kit. Her beauty left Sandstorm speechless. "Her name will be Hopekit." Then she looked at the last kit. "His name will be Freekit, but call him Free. He can never know where he came from."

Chapter 1

[image]

Many Moons Later

Featherstream lay crumpled at Graystripe's side, her cries echoing throughout the camp. Her wails were heart-shattering. Everyone's eyes turned to her and in no time Stormblaze was at Featherstream's side. There was so much blood; it shone like a crimson lake underneath the moon's light.

Hopeflame took a small step forward, and then another. She soon stood alongside Stormblaze and looked down upon Graystripe. His long gray fur was matted with dried blood and there was so much that she couldn't see where it had come from. Her throat clenched tightly as she struggled not to wail in despair.

"No, father!" Featherstream screeched, her eyes filled with distress. "There was so much I wanted to tell you! Please don't go! I need you!"

Hopeflame shared a glance with Stormblaze and she saw that he was distraught. His amber eyes were heavy with grief and he was shaking. She moved closer so that her fur brushed against his in an attempt to comfort him. Her head lowered in sorrow and she looked into Graystripe's eyes. He was fading fast.

"I'm going to tell them, Graystripe." Hopeflame whispered to him. "I'm going to tell them the truth. They won't be alone."

Stormblaze frowned and studied her in confusion. "Tell us what?"

Before she could reply, the crowd parted and Hopeflame sighed in relief to see Sandstorm and Owlgaze. Hopeflame tried to hold it together, but at the sight of her mother, she couldn't. Her shoulders shook with sobs and Sandstorm immediately moved closer to comfort her daughter.

The aftermath of the battle shook the forest. Throughout the camp, the bodies of the fallen were discovered. The camp was filled with screams and crying as queens found their mates slaughtered, cats cried for their dead kin. This was the kind of screaming that sent chills down a cat's spine, the kind that took the heart ransom.

Hopeflame leaned into her mother's shoulder and sobbed. This was her fault. This was all her fault! She could've decided to stay loyal to RiverClan and maybe Graystripe wouldn't be dying! In that moment, Hopeflame decided that she hated Tigerstar for what he's done to her.

What he made her do.

"He's gone," Stormblaze suddenly announced solemnly.

Featherstream's wails echoed off of the trees and tore into the hearts of all onlookers. Stormblaze lowered his head and suffered silently while he attempted to comfort his sister. The crowd parted and Tigerstar was standing there in his dark glory.

Hopeflame pulled away from Sandstorm and stood at attention. Tigerstsr narrowed his amber eyes at the sight before him. "What's going on?"

No words came from her mouth. Hopeflame didn't know what to say. Did she lie or tell the truth? Either way, the truth had to come out. She decided that she's had enough lying.

"Graystripe...he was my father, too." Hopeflame finally admitted. Speaking those words out loud lifted a heavy weight off of her shoulders.

Stormblaze's amber eyes glazed over in shock. He stared at her as if she had two heads. Featherstream's jaw lay agape and her eyes turned to Owlgaze, the father of her kits. Her half-brother.

Shocked whispers and uproar broke out from the two newly united clans. Hopeflame heard the TigerClan cats calling for the blood of Graystripe's kin. She flinched away from them, the cats that she had only *just* fought alongside. Could one name really change the way

they saw her?

"Silence!" Tigerstar ordered, his voice booming across the camp. He turned angrily towards Sandstorm. "Is this true? Did you take Graystripe as your mate?"

Sandstorm lowered her head shamefully. "It's true."

While the clan argued, Hopeflame moved closer to Owlgaze. She felt safe in the crook of her brother's body. Stormblaze and Featherstream wouldn't stop staring at her. She just wanted them to look away.

Suddenly, Brambleclaw was there, standing beside Tigerstar. He couldn't take his eyes off of her and Hopeflame couldn't tell if he hated her. She peeled away from Owlgaze and Sandstorm to stand in front of Brambleclaw.

Without warning, Brambleclaw licked her forehead and wrapped her in his embrace. Her head rested on his chest as his head laid atop her head. They stayed like that with the entire clan watching them.

"We'll talk later," Brambeclaw promised.

Tigerstar cleared his throat. "TigerClan's camp is now based at Fourtrees. We move there in the morning. Whitestorm, Blackfoot, Longtail, Mousefur, Fawnstep, and Dawncloud will guard the camp tonight." Really, he meant that they would guard RiverClan.

Cats started to make their nests all over the camp. The RiverClan warriors returned to their regular nests and Hopeflame noticed that they banded closer together. The apprentices joined them in there, too. There became a clear line between RiverClan and TigerClan. Hopeflame didn't know where she belonged.

Featherstream and Stormblaze settled beside Graystripe as they stood vigil for him. Hopeflame watched, desperately wanting to join them. Owlgaze appeared at her side, watching them, too.

"How long have you known?" Owlgaze suddenly asked her.

"Ever since I came to RiverClan," Hopeflame admitted. "Graystripe told me, but Stormblaze and Featherstream never knew."

Owlgaze lowered his head. "That's why you didn't want Featherstream and I to be together, isn't it? You were trying to save us from making a grave mistake."

The russet she-cat nodded, "I didn't want to tell anyone because I feared that Tigerstar would kill us all. He still might."

Owlgaze took a deep breath. "Well, Featherstream is expecting my kits. Knowing this doesn't change that. And now Tigerstar knows, the whole clan knows, so what's holding you back?"

Hopeflame swallowed and her eyes found Stormblaze. "Tigerstar made me seduce Stormblaze. I'm afraid that he'll think I betrayed him and not see the reasons."

"I'm sure he'll come around." Owlgaze suddenly chuckled out of no where. "Wow, I have a brother."

Hopeflame smiled despite the circumstances. "You always wanted a brother. Let's join them."

She stood up and slowly approached Stormblaze and Featherstream. "May we join you?" Hopeflame whispered meekly. They had every reason to turn them away, especially her.

Stormblaze opened his mouth but Featherstream answered before he could. "Of course, after all, I guess we're family now." Featherstream turned back to Graystripe who now lay cleaned off thanks to them.

Hopeflame settled beside Featherstream and Owlgaze. She took the time to remember every memory she's shared with Graystripe. From the first time they met to him teaching her to swim and fish.

"Hopeflame?" Brambleclaw's voice caused her to glance over her shoulder. "Can we talk?"

She hesitated but eventually stood up. Hopeflame padded after Brambleclaw and he led her to the edge of camp where they could

talk in private. He settled down in front of her and Hopeflame studied him.

"I don't care that your father was Graystripe," Brambleclaw suddenly blurted out. "I love *you*, Hopeflame, and none of that matters."

Hopeflame stared up at him, silhouetted against the moon. His amber eyes were soft and warm, reminding her of the sun. She found herself scooting closer to him. "I love you, too, Brambleclaw."

"Do you remember that promise I made to you when we were both apprentices?" Brambleclaw asked and he didn't wait for an answer. "I meant that. You're going to be my deputy *and* my mate. I want kits with you, Hopeflame."

She purred softly at hearing these words. "Soon," She promised him, "After all this calms down."

Brambleclaw nosed her cheek and twined his tail with hers. Every touch sent shivers down Hopeflame's spine. After a few moments, she returned to keep vigil over Graystripe. With the moon suspended over them, it was easy for Hopeflame to daydream of better times.

Chapter 2

[image]

Sunrise finally came after the longest night Hopeflame's ever experienced. The sun rose above the trees, bringing a brand new light to the forest. A deep hush still remained over the forest as if it were holding its breath. Fog twined through the trees, bathing the forest in ghostly white.

Outside the camp, Hopeflame could hear the stream. In the distance, birds were chirping, a sign that the forest was waking up. She opened her green eyes and took in the sorry sight that was the RiverClan camp.

In the light of day, it was easier to see the damage done. The dens were half-torn down, blood and fur covered the ground, bodies were sporadically placed for vigils, and countless cats bowed their heads in mourning. Last night had been like a nightmare, and Hopeflame wished that it wasn't real. She wished that it would all magically go away and that Graystripe would walk through the camp entrance with a trout in his jaws.

But it took her one look at his body to know that this was real. She had really forsaken RiverClan and fought for TigerClan. Last night she had killed Crookedstar and injured many she had called her clanmates. Hopeflame felt empty and heavy with guilt. She could've sworn that her russet pelt was stained red with blood.

She moved slightly to discover that she must've fallen asleep beside Brambleclaw. The TigerClan deputy was still in deep sleep and he looked innocent like this. Hopeflame could almost forget the glint in his eyes that reminded her too much of Tigerstar. Almost.

Hopeflame got to her paws and stretched. Stormblaze and Featherstream laid side by side next to Graystripe, sound asleep. Not too far away, Hopeflame noticed Sandstorm and Owlgaze. They had blood on their paws and mountains between them, but they were still kin.

Tigerstar stood at the center of camp, his pelt like a shadow in the pale sun. His amber eyes found her and he motioned her over. Hopeflame nervously approached Tigerstar. What would he do now that he knew that her father was Graystripe?

"You performed well in the face of battle." Tigerstar meowed evenly. "It can be easy to fake loyalty up until you need to fight alongside them."

Hopeflame didn't say anything at first. She was trying to figure out what to say. "Will Stormblaze and Featherstream be able to join TigerClan? They can't help who their father was."

"Just like you can't help who *your* father was?" Tigerstar accused suddenly, his amber eyes glinting with malice.

Her pelt ruffled in agitation. "Yes, none of us can help who fathers us."

Tigerstar suddenly became reserved and a coldness filled his eyes. He dug his claws into the dirt. "I understand." Then he snapped out of his trance and glanced at her. "I will show them mercy, just this once. If either of them show the slightest hint of disloyalty, I'll have no choice but to exterminate them."

Hopeflame dipped her head to show him how grateful she was. She padded away back to where Brambleclaw slept. He was slowly waking and looked up at her. The way he looked at her made her heart flutter and legs become weak.

"Good morning, Hopeflame," Brambleclaw purred as he sat up.

She became bold and rubbed against his chest, purring. "Good morning, Brambleclaw." He rested his chin on her back and licked her ears. Her green eyes opened and made contact with Stormblaze's across the camp clearing. She turned her eyes up at Brambleclaw. "I have to talk to him."

Hopeflame slipped away from Brambleclaw and walked across the clearing to Stormblaze, his amber eyes burning with fire. "Stormblaze? Can we talk?"

He gave her a hard look but then he slowly nodded his head. Together they left the RiverClan camp while Tigerstar prepared the clan to move. They would all be traveling to Fourtrees to make the new camp. It would position them closer to WindClan and make it easier to attack.

They crossed the shallow stream and it only went up to Hopeflame's bellyfur. She stepped into the forest, letting the shadows envelope her. Stormblaze blended in the the shadows, making him seem more forlorn. She turned to face him but she couldn't find the words she needed.

"Stormblaze-"

"Everything was a lie," Stormblaze cut her off. The anger in his voice was thick and forceful. He unsheathed his claws and dug them into the dirt. "You never cared about us or Graystripe! It's your fault that he's dead!"

Hopeflame flattened her ears and shied away from him. "No, Stormblaze, you don't understand. Please let me explain..."

Stormblaze lashed his tail in rage. Hate began to burn in his amber eyes. "Please."

She lowered her head, momentarily lost for words. Then she lifted her head. "I left TigerClan on Tigerstar's order to infiltrate RiverClan. He wanted me to gain the clan's trust so I could gain information. When I came to RiverClan, I hadn't known that Graystripe was my father or that you and Featherstream were my kin. He told me and I knew that sooner or later I'd have to choose."

"I also knew that if Tigerstar found out that Graystripe was my father, he'd kill you both and everyone I loved in TigerClan. At the time, they naturally meant more to me since I've known them my entire life. They were my own blood. But as I stayed longer in RiverClan..." She lowered her head to shield her emotions.

"I realized that I loved you, Graystripe, and Featherstream just as much. It left me torn, confused, and guilt ridden. How could I choose one over the other? Then I met with Tigerstar. I told him

half the truth, that you and Featherstream would make great additions to TigerClan and that he should consider sparing you despite Graystripe being your father."

Stormblaze remained silent as Hopeflame continued. "Then he told me that if I could promise your loyalty that he would spare you. Tigerstar then ordered me...he ordered me to seduce you. He claimed that love outweighs loyalty. So I did it even though I knew that you were my brother. I did it because I thought it would save your life!"

At first Stormblaze said nothing. He wouldn't look Hopeflame or even acknowledge her. "You let me believe that we could be something. You *seduced* me even when you knew we were related by blood... And you lied, about everything."

"I'm sorry, Stormblaze, but I didn't have many options!" Hopeflame argued. "I did it to save your life!

Stormblaze shook his head. "If staying alive means living in a clan of liars then I wish I'd perished alongside my father." He turned his back on her and left her standing in the shadows.

Hopeflame may have lost him forever.

Chapter 3

[image]

The total death count included Graystripe, Stumpytail, Wetfoot, Willowpelt, Sootfur, Shadepelt, and Heavystep. While Tigerstar organized the final arrangements for the clan to move, the dead were buried. Hopeflame joined Stormblaze and Featherstream quietly to lay their father to rest. Owlgaze had gone to the TigerClan camp to retrieve Maplepaw so that she could lay eyes on their father for the first and last time. Too bad it had to be his corpse.

Sandstorm joined them as they carried Graystripe out of camp along with the other dead. Stormblaze led the group to a quiet clearing with wildflowers and willow trees surrounding it. He said that Graystripe used to come here a lot to be alone. They set to work digging the grave before carefully lowering him down.

Together, they all covered his stiff body with dirt. When they finished, they circled around his grave and bowed their heads. Hopeflame felt a chill in the air as if she were being watched. She looked up and around but saw nothing.

"Should we say something?" Featherstream whispered.

Stormblaze started: "Graystripe, you were the best father any cat could ask for. You taught me the difference between right and wrong and to stand up for what I believe in."

Featherstream went next: "You always made me laugh when I felt upset. And I'll never forget how you taught me how to swim or the stories you used to tell. I love you."

There was an awkwardness filled with silence and Hopeflame decided to break it. "Graystripe, you saved my life more than once. I'll never forget the things you taught me or how you made me feel safe. I never deserved to have a father as great as you." The russet she-cat lowered her head to hide her emotions. There was so much

more she wished she could say...

Sandstorm slowly spoke up: "Graystripe, we grew up together and trained together as apprentices. I know that I was arrogant and I said things to you, Fireheart, and Ravenpaw that I shouldn't have. But I guess that one day I grew up and realized what a great friend could be found in you. When life came crashing down around me, you gave me hope."

After Sandstorm's words, they all became speechless. Hopeflame was close to tears. Her mother's words perfectly explained Graystripe's character. She realized how much she missed him and it made her feel weak. How could she go on without Graystripe? How could any of them go on?

"I didn't know you," Owlgaze murmured. "But I wish that I could have so I don't have the tainted image that's been planted in my mind since kithood. I wish that you weren't gone."

Maplepaw spoke up next, softly, quietly. "I wish that I had known my father."

After they all said their words, they stood there for the longest time. Hopeflame took the time to remember every moment she's had with Graystripe. She felt fortunate compared to Owlgaze and Maplepaw to have known him.

"Let's return," Sandstorm choked out. "It's time to leave."

And so they left the grave of Graystripe.

~*~

"Brambleclaw, Hopeflame, Thornclaw, Swiftwind, and Fawnstep, you five will go to the old camp to prepare the queens and kits. Join us in three days at Fourtrees." Tigerstar ordered. "Go now."

Hopeflame stayed at Brambleclaw's flank and they left the RiverClan camp. Thornclaw, Swiftwind, and Fawnstep followed close behind. She trotted at Brambleclaw's shoulder through the forest. When they reached the river, Hopeflame led the charge into the water. Her clanmates followed, but more cautiously.

Her confident strides carried her through the water. She closed her eyes for a moment and remembered the day Graystripe taught her to swim. Or the day she almost drowned and he saved her life. He had loved her from the very beginning, she realized, even before they'd met.

The long-haired russet she-cat pulled herself out of the bank with her clanmates behind her. Brambleclaw took the lead and they raced through the forest. She fell into step with Thornclaw and it reminded her of her first ventures into the forest. After all, he'd been her first mentor.

They arrived at the TigerClan camp and the only ones here were apprentices, queens, and kits. Hopeflame took in the faces that she hasn't seen in moons. She saw very familiar faces that she's grown up with and newer faces that were now her clanmates. Three apprentices emerged from the apprentice den. The last time she saw them they were kits.

"Did we win?" Cloverpaw, a black and white she-cat asked excitedly. Her tail waved in excitement as she bounced around. Ravenpaw and Hollypaw followed their sister a bit slower.

"Of course we did," Brambleclaw purred as he nosed the younger she-cat. Hopeflame's heart fluttered a bit seeing how good he was with younger cats.

Cinderpelt, Brightflower, and Ferncloud appeared from the nursery. Brightflower was very round with the unborn kits of Swiftwind; it looked like she could kit any day now. Ferncloud was only slightly round and Cinderpelt wasn't showing at all yet. Swiftwind immediately went to Brightflower and reunited with her.

Hopeflame's eyes lit in excitement at the sight of her old friend, Ferncloud. She padded over to her, purring. "Wow, Ferncloud, you look great!"

Ferncloud touched her nose with Hopeflame's. "You think? I'm so nervous since they're my first."

"I've never seen a happier queen," Hopeflame stated with

confidence.

Then her eyes moved to Cinderpelt. The dark gray she-cat sat near the entrance to the nursery with a faraway look in her blue eyes. Hopeflame knew that Cinderpelt probably hadn't wanted kits but it was the Code of TigerClan.

Brambleclaw stood at the center of the clearing and spoke loudly for all to hear. "Tigerstar has ordered that we wait here for three days until Fourtrees is ready to move in. Well have one more queen joining us from RiverClan."

As if on cue, Featherstream stepped into the camp. Hopeflame watched her sister look around and flinch away from all the looks she got. Her heart went out to her sister but she knew that she would make friends quickly. In fact, Ferncloud padded over to her almost immediately.

"Featherstream? You probably don't remember me but you and your brother nursed alongside me and Ashfang for a few days when we were kits." Ferncloud mowed softly.

"I don't remember but I remember my father telling me that." Featherstream answered softly.

Hopeflame looked away and let them be. She still didn't know how Featherstream felt towards her, although she imagined she felt similar to Stormblaze. It felt strange to Hopeflame, being back in the TigerClan camp. She felt like a stranger among her own clanmates.

Brambleclaw was suddenly at her side, his warm fur brushing against hers. "Do you want to share the den underneath the Highrock with me?"

"The leader's den? Won't Tigerstar be upset?" Hopeflame squeaked.

Brambleclaw huffed in amusement. "I'm his son *and* deputy. I think he'll be okay with it." He looked out over to Fawnstep, Swiftwind, and Thornclaw. "Can you three go hunt for the queens? Take Ravenpaw and Hollypaw with you." The three warriors nodded and

went to find the two apprentices.

"I still can't believe that you're the clan deputy," Hopeflame mused. "When did we grown up, Brambleclaw? It seems like just yesterday we were kits wrestling in the dirt."

"You were always faster than me," Brambleclaw chuckled, his broad shoulders shaking as he laughed.

Hopeflame's whiskers twitched, "But you were always stronger than me." She settled down at the base of Highrock, the shadow offering them enough shade. Brambleclaw laid down beside her as they kept a watchful eye on the camp.

"What do you think will happen to the old camps? Will they just be abandoned?" Hopeflame wondered.

Brambleclaw shrugged and snuggled closer to her. "I don't know, I guess that's for Tigerstar to decide."

Hopeflame's eyes looked up at the blue sky and the clouds as they lazily rolled through the sky. "Do you think that TigerClan will ever be truly unified? You know, to the point where no one remembers what clan they used to belong to?"

He thought about it for a moment and nodded, "Over time, yes. It might take a generation or two, but look how unified the ShadowClan cats are with us already. That's just after a few moons."

She laid her head against his chest as he curled his body around hers. "I love you, Brambleclaw."

His husky voice answered as his warm breath tickled her ear. "I love you most, Hopeflame.

Chapter 4

[image]

Hopeflame woke from her short doze to find the camp tranquil. The warriors had returned a while ago with fresh-kill for everyone, leaving it in a pile at the center of the clearing. She imagined that the queens were resting in the nursery while the three warriors were in the warriors den.

Brambleclaw still slept soundly, so Hopeflame carefully slipped away so she wouldn't wake him. She stretched her legs and arched her back before stepping out of the leaders den. It still felt strange that they had napped in there. The whole time Hopeflame had imagined Tigerstar suddenly appearing and ripping their pelts.

It was sunhigh and the heat of the sun beat down on Hopeflame's thick pelt. She actually missed the river and being able to cool off whenever she wanted. RiverClan had offered her a nice home, but TigerClan has always been where she belonged.

Hopeflame remembered the days she spent in RiverClan as Tigerstar's spy. She had never imagined that she would find kin or friends among the RiverClan cats. They had welcomed her into their camp, trusted her, even given her a warrior name worth boasting about... And she had betrayed them, all of them.

From the corner of her eye, Hopeflame noticed the three apprentices emerge from their den. The last time she had seen them, they were young kits. Where had the time gone?

Ravenpaw, the black tom, looked strong and almost ready to be a warrior. His two sisters, Cloverpaw and Hollypaw, both seemed energetic and ready for whatever was thrown at them. Together, they had a strong bond that would take StarClan itself to destroy.

Hopeflame remembered when she was like that with her two littermates. As kits, she, Owlgaze, and Maplepaw would explore the camp and cause such a ruckus. It was a wonder how Sandstorm

handled all three of them. They never slowed down and sometimes got into ridiculous bickers with no end.

She watched as the three apprentices mock-battled each other. Ravenpaw was stronger than his two sisters, but they both were quicker than him. Hopeflame found entertainment in watching them practice. Then she noticed three little head spoke out of the nursery.

Those must be Darkflower's kits. They were probably only a moon old. Hopeflame watched as the three kits exited the nursery and watched the apprentices wrestle. She studied each of them and saw potential for each of them to become great warriors.

"They're names are Ebonykit, Smallkit, and Pinekit," Brambleclaw meowed as he came to stand beside her. "They're Darkflower and Runningwind's kits."

Hopeflame glanced at the kits in surprise. "So they're the first *real* TigerClan cats? Intermixed, I mean."

Brambleclaw nodded his dark tabby head. "The clan was very excited when they were born. Cinderpelt is expecting Jaggedtooth's kits, so that'll be another mixed litter."

There was a moment of silence and Hopeflame tried to refrain from the one questions she was dying to ask. "Was it forced?" Hopeflame blurted. When she saw the confusion on Brambleclaw's face, she became embarrassed. "I mean, were Cinderpelt and Jaggedtooth in love? Are they in love?"

Brambleclaw didn't answer at first. He blinked his amber eyes and pondered her question. "Hopeflame...it's in TigerClan's Code. She wasn't going to have kits any other way."

"So she was forced?" Hopeflame's green eyes widened. "Is that all that I'm worth to you, Brambleclaw? A breeder?"

"No, of course not, Hopeflame!" Brambleclaw hissed under his breath. "It doesn't ever have to be like that. What we have is love. You'll never have to be forced."

"Because I'll be having your kits, right? Because we're in love so I should automatically have your kits." Hopeflame's green gaze filled with fire. "What happens to any other she-cat that doesn't find love? Will she be forced?"

"Come on, Hopeflame," Brambleclaw sighed. "Don't do this..."

"Answer the question, Brambleclaw." Hopeflame's tone became cold and distanced. She didn't want to believe that Brambleclaw could condone such a heartless act.

Brambleclaw hunched over and let out a long sigh. "That's for Tigerstar to decide."

"And what happens when Tigerstar is gone?" Hopeflame hissed. "Will you continue the sick, sadistic tradition of your father?"

"It's the law, Hopeflame!" Brambleclaw growled. They were very nearly shouting now.

Hopeflame stared at him in shock. How could she have feelings for such a heartless cat? Maybe he was exactly like his father but she'd been too scared to notice. She's fallen in love with the son of Tigerstar, but only now did she see the resemblance.

She couldn't even reply to him. The long-haired russet she-cat bounded away and left the camp. Hopeflame ran and ran and didn't stop. She didn't know where she was going or what she was looking for. All she knew was that she had to keep moving.

A tree root tripped her and Hopeflame fell, cutting her leg open. She yowled in pain and limped away from the root, favoring her front right leg. Crimson droplets oozed from the cut and stained her russet fur a darker red, almost black. Her body winced from the pain and she settled down in the grass.

Great, now she was injured and no one knew where she was. Which direction was camp? She's been gone for so long that all the trees looked awfully similar. Plus, she had been running blindly and hadn't laid attention to where she was going.

A buzzing sound along with the sound of running water told her

that she was in between the Treecut Place and the river. That meant she was awfully far away from camp. The russet she-cat tried to stand, but her leg gave out and she crumpled in pain.

Suddenly, the undergrowth before her rustled. Her heart started racing. What if it was a fox or a badger? How was she supposed to defend herself?! Hopeflame tried to stand again but had no luck.

The undergrowth parted and Hopeflame tensed. Stepping from the undergrowth was...Graystripe? No, it couldn't be! Seeing this tom's forest green eyes, much like her own, she knew it couldn't be her father. But how was it that he looked so much like him?

This tom's long fur was gray like Graystripe's, almost the exact same shade except maybe a little paler. Starting from his forehead and all the way down to the tip of his tail was a dark dorsal stripe, just like hers. He was muscular and stocky with strong haunches like a TigerClan cat.

"Are you okay?" The tom spoke with concern. He sounded younger than Graystripe, perhaps close to her age. "I heard you scream and then I smelled the blood..." Hopeflame merely gaped at him, still mesmerized by the similarity. "Uh, are you okay? Oh! You're one of those forest cats, aren't you? And I'm on your territory... Sorry, I just...I just thought you were in trouble."

"I-I am," Hopeflame couldn't think clearly, or speak for that matter. "I cut my leg by tripping and I can't walk back to my camp."

"Do you want me to help you?" The tom offered without a second thought. "I don't mind and I won't tell anyone where your camp is. Besides, I don't have many cats to tell."

"What's your name?" Hopeflame asked suddenly.

The tom seemed confused by her question, but he answered swiftly. "My name's Free."

"Where do you live?" Hopeflame wondered. She wanted to know where this tom came from.

"I live on a farm out past the moors by the river," Free said. "I live

with a few other cats out there: my mother, Butterfly, my father, Barley, and our friend, Ravenpaw."

"Ravenpaw?" Hopeflame tested the name on her tongue. Her mind flew back a few moons to when Graystripe told her about him and his friends. One of them had been named Ravenpaw. She remembered Graystripe telling her that he and Fireheart had helped Ravenpaw escape because he was in danger.

"Do you still want help to get back to your camp?" Free wondered.

Hopeflame shook her head. "No, I think I'll manage." She tried to stand up and this time managed to stay standing. The blood had clotted by now and she saw the wound wasn't very deep. "Thank you, Free. I hope that we meet again someday."

"What's your name?" Free asked quickly.

How mouse-brained of her! Hopeflame's pelt turned hot with embarrassment. "My name is Hopeflame." Then she turned and disappeared into the undergrowth. She had momentarily forgot her fight with Brambleclaw. Free was the only tom on her mind right now.

Chapter 5

[image]

The three days were up and their time away from TigerClan was over. Hopeflame entered into the nursery to see what the queens needed help with. Darkflower was curled around her three kits as they napped. Her gaze softened upon seeing the sleeping kits, and she found herself silently wishing for kits of her own.

"Good morning, Hopeflame." Cinderpelt purred. The dark gray she-cat was trying to seem happy, but Hopeflame saw deep down that she was miserable. Her blue eyes were filled with sadness.

"Darkflower," Hopeflame addressed the black queen. "Do you need help carrying your kits?"

"We'll help her," Ferncloud answered first. "There's me, Cinderpelt, Brightflower, and Featherstream."

Hopeflame nodded, "Alright, why don't you all come outside. We're preparing to leave any moment now." She backed out of the nursery and turned to find everyone else waiting.

Brambleclaw stood at the head of the group and he spoke quietly with Swiftwind. Thornclaw and Fawnstep sat with Ravenpaw, Cloverpaw, and Hollypaw. From behind her, the queens exited the nursery with Darkflower's kits in tow.

"I think we're all set, Brambleclaw," Hopeflame mewed. She stood in front of the clan deputy respectfully but distanced. They had sort of said their apologies after their argument, but she still felt a little awkward around him.

Pain filled Brambleclaw's amber gaze at the realization that they still weren't on the best of terms. "Alright everyone, let's move out. If anyone needs to stop and rest just let me know."

The dark brown tabby tom took the lead out of the TigerClan camp.

Hopeflame glanced over her shoulder at the camp one last time. This was where she had grown up and all of her kithood memories were here. This camp is where she had first developed a crush on Brambleclaw. She told herself that this wouldn't be forever and she could visit anytime she wanted.

"Are you okay?" Brambleclaw suddenly asked her, making her jump.

"You startled me!" Hopeflame hissed, but then she realized he was just concerned. She wondered if she should tell him about the tom she met. "I don't know...I think I saw my father's spirit."

Brambleclaw frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Hopeflame glanced over her shoulder at the group following them. None of them were within earshot. "I mean that I meet a cat that looks *exactly* like Graystripe, except for his eyes. They're green, like mine." Their pelts brushed against the undergrowth as they walked side by side on the narrow path.

Brambleclaw glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one could overhear. Then he ducked his head down to talk quietly. "Exactly? There are a lot of gray cats in the world, Hopeflame." He sounded patronizing and it made her blood boil.

"No, Brambleclaw," Hopeflame hissed quietly. "He was the spitting image of Graystripe, dorsal stripe and all." She wondered how that could be. Were they related? Even Stormblaze didn't look exactly like Graystripe.

"Maybe you just imagined those similarities?" Brambleclaw suggested. "I mean, you've only just buried Graystripe." He must've seen the look of horror on her face at his blunt words and quickly apologized. "Sorry..."

"Whatever," Hopeflame growled bitterly. She flattened her ears and narrowed her eyes at Brambleclaw. "I thought you would at least *try* to understand."

She fell back to walk alongside Thornclaw, leaving Brambleclaw alone in the lead. Her former mentor gave her a knowing look. The

golden-brown warrior heaved a sigh before speaking. "Are you alright, Hopeflame?"

"I'm fine," Hopeflame lied. She didn't want to open her heart to anyone right now.

So she walked alongside Thornclaw in silence and studied the forest around her. It was just past sunset and darkness was taking over the forest. The shadows took over the forest floor, making it cool to the touch. Her russet pelt appeared darker in the shadows, but her green eyes still shone brightly.

Overhead, through the tree canopy, she could see Silverpelt and the moon shining brightly against the inky black sky. Hopeflame looked up just as a streak flew across the sky, a falling star. Chills ran down her spine and she wondered if it was a cat falling from StarClan, assuming they existed.

Up ahead Hopeflame saw the four tall oaks rise above the rest of the trees. Brambleclaw led the group towards the entrance which Hopeflame realized must be the *only* entrance now. The closer they got, Hopeflame couldn't stop staring.

In the matter of three days, Tigerstar had turned Fourtrees into a fortress. Tall walls of brambles and rocks connected the four oaks and expanded out further to leave room for dens. When they entered into the camp, Hopeflame's jaw dropped at the size of the dens. TigerClan cats milled around, adding the finishing touches, even the RiverClan cats were hard at work.

"Wow," Brightflower breathed, speaking for Hopeflame.

The clan noticed their arrival and Tigerstar approached the group with his head held high. "Goldenflower," Tigerstar called over his shoulder. "Show the queens to the new nursery."

The pale golden tabby she-cat padded over and led Darkflower, Brightflower, Ferncloud, Cinderpelt, and Featherstream away towards a large den on the opposite side of the entrance. To the immediate left, Hopeflame saw what must be the warriors den. TigerClan cats had moved large fallen logs and used them to create

a skeleton for the massive shelter. The rest of it was made from brambles.

The apprentice den was like the warriors den, but a little smaller. Hopeflame noticed the healer den to the right. She could tell because of the smell of herbs wafting from it. The healer den was much bigger since now there was more than one healer. Hopeflame turned her attention to the Great Rock. It looked as if Tigerstar had carved out a den beneath the Great Rock, using brambles to make up the rest of it.

Tigerstar leaped up onto the Great Rock and yowled, calling a clan meeting. Cats emerged from all corners of the camp, three clans combined into one. Soon, Hopeflame knew that Tigerstar would have his eyes set on WindClan. Hopeflame watched Brambleclaw move to stand beneath the Great Rock. He looked every bit the deputy he was.

"Cats of TigerClan, we have accomplished much in a few short moons." Tigerstar's voice boomed across the large camp, echoing off of the Great Oaks. "The forest is more united than it's ever been before, and only WindClan stands in the way of complete unity. For now, we will take this time to recuperate and focus on strengthening this clan's bond. But soon...we will rise up and unify the clans forever!"

Cheering erupted from everyone except the RiverClan cats. They still didn't feel like TigerClan cats, but Hopeflame knew that in time they would. ShadowClan, after all, has adjusted well.

"TigerClan! TigerClan!" Hopeflame joined in the cheer, hoping to show her clanmates that she was fully committed. She's probably sacrificed the most for this cause, even more than Tigerstar.

The night air was filled the cheering of TigerClan cats. Their voices shook the night. TigerClan was a force to be reckoned with.

Chapter 6

[image]

Hopeflame awoke to find sunlight streaming into the large, roomy warriors den. Her green eyes surveyed all of the sleeping warriors and she saw that there was plenty of room for when WindClan joined. In the nest next to her, Brambleclaw slept soundly. It was dawn, so he should probably wake up, but everyone was tired after last night.

She gently prodded him with her paw. "Brambleclaw," Her voice was barely a whisper. "Brambleclaw!"

The dark brown tabby tom jerked awake but relaxed when he saw that it was her. "Good morning, Hopeflame." He purred and licked in between her ears. "Would you like to join me on one of the dawn patrols?"

"One?" Hopeflame asked in confusion. There was more than one dawn patrol?

Brambleclaw got to his paws and stretched. "New rule: one patrol for each border. There's the WindClan border, the border with the twolegplace, and the farthest border ShadowClan used to share with rogue country."

Hopeflame nodded, understanding now. "Let's grab some fresh-kill and then you can assign patrols."

Together, they approached the fresh-kill pile. Brambleclaw grabbed a large rabbit that they could both share. They settled down at the center of camp to eat. Hopeflame wouldn't say anything, but she was glad that her argument with Brambleclaw was over. She had overthought much of the topics they argued about. Probably just stress caused by Graystripe's death.

She felt a pang of grief remembering her father and Brambleclaw gave her a look. "Are you alright?" His warm amber eyes were filled

with concern for her.

Hopeflame nodded, "I'm just missing Graystripe, that's all." She took a bite from the rabbit and focused on eating. Brambleclaw's eyes stayed on her for a moment longer but then he joined her in the meal.

Much of the clan was starting to emerge from their dens now, awaiting orders by Brambleclaw. They quickly finished the rabbit and Brambleclaw faced the clan to organize patrols. Hopeflame sat down and watched him, he seemed so comfortable under the pressure.

"Whitestorm will take the twolegplace border with Blackclaw, Fawnstep, Runningwind, Tawnypelt, and Hailpaw. Russetfur will take the rogue border with Oakfur, Longtail, Petalnose, Stonefur, Dawncloud, and Hollypaw." Brambleclaw took a deep breath and watched those cats begin to depart. "I will take the WindClan border with Hopeflame, Jaggedtooth, Dustpelt, Sorreltail, Mosspelt, Cloverpaw, and Shimmerpaw."

Then he moved on to hunting patrols: "I want two hunting patrols, one led by Blackfoot and the other by Goldenflower. Take whomever you'd like."

Brambleclaw stepped towards her with the other members of their patrol. Hopeflame noticed that Mosspelt and Shimmerpaw seemed uneasy and she wished she could comfort them. But she wasn't trusted by the RiverClan cats, so she stuck close to Brambleclaw.

The dark brown tabby tom seemed surprised but didn't argue. From the den beneath the Great Rock, Hopeflame saw a flicker of motion. A moment later, Brambleclaw's shadow emerged and padded in their direction.

"Brambleclaw," Tigerstar purred at his son. "I'd like to join your patrol."

Hopeflame glanced at Brambleclaw and watched him dip his head to the leader. "Of course, Tigerstar."

Tigerstar led the patrol out of camp. Brambleclaw walked at his father's flank and Hopeflame fell into step with him. The rest of the patrol followed and she glanced over her shoulder. This was an awfully big patrol, but when you have a gigantic clan...

They first headed towards the gorge to mark the stretch of territory that was theirs. Hopeflame realized with a sickening feeling that she would be passing RiverClan's old territory. She would be glimpsing in on a part of her life that died during the Merge. Her mind flew back to when she nearly slipped into the gorge but was saved by both Graystripe *and* Crookedstar.

When they reached the gorge, the patrol left their scent for WindClan. Then they started to follow the border back, marking along the way. She kept a careful eye out for any WindClan cats. It was likely that they were on high alert. What would happen at the next Gathering? She doubted that Tigerstar would let them near Fourtrees.

A sudden brush at her side made her jump, but she sighed when she saw that it was only Brambleclaw. He wasn't leading the patrol anymore, Tigerstar was. His warm amber eyes fell on her and she could sense their warmth.

"What?" She asked him softly. She didn't glance at him so they wouldn't draw attention to themselves.

Brambleclaw simply shook his head and watched her with a sort of awe. "Nothing, you're just so beautiful."

Her pelt became hot with embarrassment under his stare. She didn't say anything, just twined her tail with his. How was it that only a few words from him could make her world seem so much brighter? Brambleclaw made her feel whole and complete.

Jaggedtooth let out a warning growl which drew everyone's eyes to the horizon. Hopeflame's eyes turned up towards the moors where she saw a cat silhouetted against the sky. She recognized the cat as Crowfeather from when she visited WindClan with Crookedstar to strike an alliance. The black tom's eyes connected with hers and she shivered.

"What's wrong?" Brambleclaw asked as he scooted closer to her.

Hopeflame narrowed her eyes, watching Crowfeather disappear behind the horizon. "I don't know..."

Tigerstar let out a growl. "He sees RiverClan cats among us. It won't be long until they all know the news." The large dark brown tabby tom kept moving, almost ignoring the WindClan border entirely. It was all the patrol could do to keep up.

They returned to camp faster than they planned for and the cats in camp looked up in surprise. Sandstorm seemed wary and approached her daughter. "What happened?"

"A WindClan cat spotted us," Hopeflame reported to her mother, although her eyes followed Tigerstar. The leader motioned for Brambleclaw to follow him into his den. She watched them go, wondering what the were talking about.

"Hopeflame? I asked you a question." Sandstorm said with a hint of annoyance. Her sand-colored ears were flattened. "Did Tigerstar say anything?"

"No," She growled. Then Tigerstar appeared from his den again.

The tall, dark warrior approached her with an air of urgency. "Could I see you in my den, Hopeflame?" He spun and returned to his den, not even looking to see if she would follow.

She shot her mother a glance before following Tigerstar. Inside the den, Brambleclaw sat tall next to his father. They looked exactly alike, like twin shadows. If she didn't know better, she wouldn't be able to tell them apart.

"We need to secure WindClan," Tigerstar told her abruptly. "They are all that stands in the way of unity. I'd like you, Hopeflame, to enter into WindClan. You worked so well last time."

Hopeflame's jaw dropped. He wanted her to infiltrate *another* clan and directly betray more cats?! How could he ask this of her?! She's given more than any cat in this clan to unifying the forest! Shouldn't she at least get to live the normal life of a warrior? She

wanted kits, for StarClan's sake!

The russet she-cat met the eyes of Brambleclaw, her deputy, her love. His eyes were cold, the glazed over look they always gained when he was in his father's presence. But she knew that behind that mask, he was upset that Tigerstar was asking her to leave again.

"Well?" Tigerstar pressed, I patience glittered in his amber eyes. Unlike Brambleclaw's they were cold like the leaf-bare sun.

"Can I at least think about it?" Hopeflame wondered.

Tigerstar heaved his shoulders but narrowed his eyes at Hopeflame. "Very well, but I'll give you until sunset, no more."

She dipped her head respectively before retreating from Tigerstar's den. The way he looked at her made her feel like a selfish coward. But she's given up so much time already, was it wrong to want simple things? She knew that she and Brambleclaw both wanted kits and now that would have to wait.

~*~

A/N
I hope you readers are enjoying the second installment of "Hopestar's Choice" as much as I enjoy writing it. Please vote and comment!

Chapter 7

[image]

Tigerstar's question swirled in her head like a dark fear that never fades. She raced out of Tigerstar's den and left Fourtrees. Her stomach twisted with anger and anxiety. Hopeflame didn't want to leave TigerClan! She's only just returned!

"Hopeflame, wait!" Brambleclaw called and he sprinted after her.

She pretended not to hear him and disappeared into the undergrowth. Brambleclaw was on her paws, she could feel his presence right behind her. Hopeflame kept running, her paws itched to run. With everything that's happened recently, she just needed to go *somewhere*.

Brambleclaw appeared out of nowhere, cutting her off from the path before her. Hopeflame skidded to a stop and narrowly missed Brambleclaw. The dark tabby warrior stood in front of her, paws firmly planted, and a look of fierce determination on his face.

Hopeflame doubled over, heaving for breath. Everything was piling up to be too much: the Merge, her betrayal, Graystripe's death, and now Tigerstar's proposal which didn't really feel like a choice all at all. Her heart was heavy with the things she carried, the things she would never be rid of.

Brambleclaw watched her and moved closer, but almost afraid to touch her. He probably thought she would crumble. "Hopeflame? You don't have to go to WindClan. I can talk my father out of it."

"And how would that look, Brambleclaw?" Hopeflame shot back angrily. She chose her next words carefully. "If I don't accept his offer, then I'll look disloyal and if you try to talk him out of it you could loose your deputyship."

The tom's jaw squared and he stood tall. "I won't let you leave again. I lost you once, Hopeflame, and I don't want to loose you

again." He carried sorrow and regret in those amber eyes of his. Brambleclaw had enough to worry about, but somewhere along the way he decided she was worth worrying about.

"You're leaving?" A small voice squeaked.

Hopeflame glanced over her shoulder and saw her sister, Maplepaw. She had dropped the bundle of herbs she carried and they were now covered in dirt. Her ginger and white pelt was criss-crossed with shadow and sunlight. Despite them being the same age, Maplepaw still looked small compared to Hopeflame.

She made a move towards her sister who only took a step back. "Maplepaw...I don't *want* to go..."

A look of pain and anger flashed across Maplepaw's face. "You seemed eager to leave the first time! You left us alone, you left *me* alone! And now you're back and I think that we can finally rebuild our relationship, but you're leaving?!"

"I don't have much of a choice, Maplepaw!" Hopeflame wailed. She felt Brambleclaw press against her side for support. "It won't be as long as last time!"

"You've already made your decision?" Brambleclaw looked to her in surprise.

Hopeflame took a deep breath. "I think so. If I'm going to serve my clan, and this is what I must do, then I'll do it." *Even though it didn't end well last time.*

Maplepaw's gaze became cold, her amber eyes hardening like stone. "I guess pleasing Tigerstar is more important to you than kin. Look what happened to Graystripe."

It happened before Hopeflame realized what she was doing. Her claws were outstretched as she lashed Maplelaw across the face. Maplepaw screeched and reeled back, blood oozing down her cheek. All she could do was stare in horror at what she did to her sister.

"Come on, Hopeflame," Brambleclaw nudged her towards Fourtress.

"Let's give Tigerstar your answer." She let him lead her away from her sister and the horrible act she just committed. Maybe she was more like Tigerstar than she thought.

~*~

Back in the camp, she went straight for Tigerstar's den. She was intercepted by a very angry Stormblaze. "Is it true?!" Her half-brother demanded. "Is it true that you're going to help Tigerstar bring down WindClan?!" He advanced on her and she became smaller under his gaze.

"How did you learn that?" Hopeflame murmured, amazed that word had traveled so quickly.

The dark gray tom stepped closer, his lips pulled back in a scowl. "Answer my question!"

"Stand down!" Brambleclaw growled, putting himself in between Stormblaze and her. The two toms locked eyes and it seemed as if they were having an entire conversation only they could hear. "I said stand down!"

Tail lashing, Stormblaze backed away but not before he threw Hopeflame an angry glare. "You're a TigerClan cat to the bone!" Then he stormed off and Hopeflame longed to go after him.

"Let him go," Brambleclaw whispered. The eyes of the entire clan were on them, having witnessed the entire ordeal. They were waiting for her to mess up, for her to fail. She was shaking and was grateful to Brambleclaw whose close presence gave her strength.

Together, they entered into Tigerstar's den. The dark tabby tom sat at attention as if he'd been expecting them. His amber eyes glinted with arrogance. "So tell me, Hopeflame," Tigerstar meowed, "Have you made a decision?"

Hopeflame glanced at Brambleclaw who gave her a small nod. This was her decision to make, she knew that. To go to WindClan would be to put her life on hold...again. Strangely though, in RiverClan, she found herself instead of losing herself.

"Yes, I've come to a decision." She raised her head and met the eyes of her manipulative leader. "I will go to WindClan."

A smirk pulled at Tigerstar's lips. "Excellent, you leave in the morning."

Chapter 8

[image]

Last night, Hopeflame said her goodbyes. She ate with Sandstorm, Brambleclaw, Owlgaze, and Maplepaw. Even Featherstream joined them towards the end. Her half-brother was nowhere in sight, probably "blowing off steam", as Featherstream put it. Hopeflame fell asleep underneath the stars with Brambleclaw at her side.

Her head rested on his chest and his body curled around hers. "When you return, we're going to finally have kits of our own, Hopeflame. They'll grow strong and brave, just like their parents."

Hopeflame purred at the visual he gave her. "I would like that, Brambleclaw." Then they fell asleep together.

~*~

Morning finally came and Brambleclaw prodded her awake. "Wake up, sleepyhead. It's time to go."

She opened her forest green eyes and sat up. Tigerstar sat atop the Great Rock and jumped down when he saw her awaken. "Good morning, Hopeflame. Brambleclaw and Owlgaze will be walking you to the border. They're going to scratch you and make you look beaten up. You're to tell WindClan that you tried to escape and live in RiverClan but after the Merge you were brought back to TigerClan. Tell them that you want to seek refuge in WindClan."

Hopeflame nodded, understanding the lie. "I understand. I won't let you down."

Tigerstar nodded his head, "We'll see about that. Your mission is to gain their trust and information." He nodded to Brambleclaw and Owlgaze whom she hadn't noticed sneak up beside her. "Don't disappoint me, Hopeflame. Or there will be consequences."

She became rigid and glanced at Brambleclaw from the corner of

her eye. Those consequences could very well mean the death of everyone she cared about. He was using her like a secret weapon...again. And there was nothing she could do about it.

"Let's go," Brambleclaw meowed, nudging her. She followed him with her brother at her side. As they left the camp, she gave a nod to Sandstorm and Maplepaw. Then she passed Stormblaze.

Her half-brother's amber eyes were cold. He intercepted her, blocking her from following Brambleclaw and Owlgaze. The dark gray warrior leaned in close to whisper in her ear. His warm breath tickled her ear and she could hear his heartbeat.

"If you do this, Hopeflame, you've lost me forever." Stormblaze warned her in a voice that could bring leaf-bare.

She swallowed her sorrow and met his gaze. "Goodbye, Stormblaze." That was the hardest thing she's ever had to do, to walk away from her brother.

The long-haired russet she-cat dashed out of the camp and followed the two toms in front of her. They had paused once they realized she wasn't following them. Owlgaze gave her a look. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Hopeflame lied, keeping her voice light as a feather. "Someone just wanted to say goodbye." *Forever*.

The three young warriors traveled quickly through the forest, their pace never wavering. Hopeflame brought up the rear and glanced over her shoulder every now and then. She half-hoped that Stormblaze would appear, asking for forgiveness. But she knew that it was foolish, she's lost him forever. He wasn't just her half-brother...he was her friend.

They followed the path that led to the border. Beyond the trees, Hopeflame could glimpse the moors. She felt a sudden bout of nerves. It had been easier to fake being a RiverClan cat, but WindClan was different. Their world was on the moors where there were no trees, no shelter, and strong winds.

"This is as far as we go," Brambleclaw announced. They stood on the edge of the border, hidden in the trees. The TigerClan deputy turned his eyes on her with sadness. "I'll be waiting for you, Hopeflame. When you come home, I'll be the first to welcome you."

Hopeflame stepped towards him and buried her face in his chest fur. "I love you, Brambleclaw." Then she moved to her brother. "Take care of Sandstorm and Maplepaw."

Owlgaze's face was grim, but he tried to act brave for her. "Of course, Hopeflame." He nuzzled her cheek and she returned the gesture.

Then she prepared herself for what would come next. Brambleclaw's claws slashed across her face, drawing blood. She hissed from the pain and wobbled a little. "I'm so sorry!" He obviously didn't like that he had to do this to her.

"Get me across the shoulders," She asked bravely. This time, Owlgaze left his mark. She screeched and pulled away. Her russet fur now stained crimson. "It's time."

Hopeflame gave each of them one last goodbye before stepping out of the trees. It might be a while before she steps underneath the forest canopy again. She shivered at the thought, suddenly feeling very cold. One last glance back to Brambleclaw and Owlgaze allowed her to watch them slip away into the shadows.

She had a general idea of where to go. The WindClan camp couldn't be *too* hard to find, there were no trees to hide it! Hopeflame made her way across the moors and quickly got lost. Everything looked the same up here on the moors!

Hopeflame flattened her ears against her head as the wind became stronger. The wind buffeted against her and her long fur whipped in the wind. She felt like she might blow away. Where was the camp?

Over the horizon, Hopeflame saw a flicker of motion. She lifted her eyes and saw four shapes appear. They were definitely WindClan cats, not shy about revealing themselves. From this distance, she couldn't recognize any of them.

Then the started running. The WindClan cats raced towards her and ran as fast as the wind. Hopeflame fluffed out her thick pelt in alarm. She hoped that they would at least let her explain herself. It had started to rain and blood now ran down her fur to leave a trail on the grass.

As the four cats got closer, Hopeflame recognized them as Webfoot, Onewhisker, Breezetail, and Soarpaw. The leader of the patrol, Webfoot-a dark gray tabby tom, approached her first. He bared his fangs at her in a warning and hissed.

"What are you doing on WindClan land, TigerClan cat?" Webfoot demanded as his tail lashed. Onewhisker, a small light brown tabby tom, stepped forward to stand at Webfoot's shoulder. Breezetail, a cream-colored she-cat, stood at Webfoot's flank with her young apprentice at her side. Together, they presented a strong, formidable front.

"I-I need to talk to Tallstar," She whimpered, hoping that she looked terrified. The rain made if easier since she looked like a half-drowned rat and had blood staining her fur. "My name is Hopeflame..."

"We know who you are." Breezetail hissed, studying Hopeflame with an uneasy stare. "You're the she-cat that joined RiverClan. How did that work out for you?"

Hopeflame tightly shut her eyes at Breezetail's harsh words. She remembered very clearly what had happened and now she seemed doomed to repeat. "Please, WindClan is my last hope."

"Why should we trust you?" Webfoot growled, "RiverClan is gone now and you're back with TigerClan!"

"I was their prisoner," She whispered, barely audible under the rain. "I'll explain everything, but only in front of Tallstar."

The three WindClan warriors exchanged wary glances, but the black and white apprentice kept her blue eyes on her. Webfoot was the first to turn back towards her. "Very well, we'll take you to Tallstar. But you are our prisoner."

She nodded her head in understanding. Onewhisker and Breezetail came to stand on either side of her while Webfoot led the way. Soarpaw trailed behind and the patrol headed over the moors towards the WindClan camp.

Chapter 9

[image]

Hopeflame felt exactly like a prisoner the way Webfoot and the rest of the patrol paraded her into the WindClan camp. Every head turned upon their arrival and some cats hissed or cursed at her. They must smell her TigerClan scent because more cats emerge from the dens which looked to Hopeflame like rabbit burrows.

At the center of camp was a flat stone that Hopeflame imagined was where Tallstar called clan meetings. The WindClan leader was nowhere in sight. Deadfoot, the WindClan deputy, approached the patrol with his hackles raised. They all seemed on edge, she realized.

"Why have you brought a *TigerClan* cat to our camp?" Deadfoot snarled, showing off his fangs. He took a threatening step forward and all the warriors of WindClan rallied behind him.

Webfoot flattened his ears in response. "She wants to talk to Tallstar."

"*I* say that we throw her out and feed her to the buzzards!" A white tom hissed. He seemed awfully young, maybe recently made a warrior.

The crowd parted and all the WindClan cats dipped their heads to whoever pushed through. A long-legged black and white tom stepped from the crowd, his head held high and long tail raised. Tallstar.

"Webfoot, what is the meaning of this?" Tallstar questioned, his voice even and calculated despite the fear Hopeflame glimpsed in his eyes.

Onewhisker and Breezetail shoved her forward so that she fell at the paws of the WindClan leader. She could hear the jeering of the WindClan cats and feared for her life. Weren't WindClan cats

supposed to be welcoming? It seemed that the recent changes in the forest have pushed them over the edge.

"Hopeflame, what a surprise," Tallstar scowled. "On your paws, TigerClan rat!"

She scrambled to her paws and stood, soaking and shaking, in front of Tallstar. All the eyes of WindClan focused on her and she knew they were probably imagining all the ways they could kill her. Hopeflame managed to stand tall despite their glares and attempted to speak with dignity.

"Tallstar, we met once before when I came with Crookedstar to strike an alliance. I was only an apprentice then and RiverClan welcomed me into their midst." She began slowly, her voice shaking slightly. They needed to believe her story.

"And look what's happened to RiverClan because of her!" It was Crowfeather to speak this time. The black tom meet her gaze with cold blue eyes.

Tallstar narrowed his eyes. "Continue."

She took a deep breath. "I sought out RiverClan because I was afraid. TigerClan scared me and I didn't want to live in fear. When I was with RiverClan, I found happiness and acceptance. Then TigerClan attacked RiverClan and they Merged. Tigerstar *allowed* me to live because his son, Brambleclaw, was in love with me."

Hopeflame allowed her voice to shake, to show them the scared young she-cat she was pretending to be. It wasn't all a lie. "I tried to tell Brambleclaw that I didn't love him and he attacked me. That's where all these scratches came from. Then I ran for my life."

She looked up at Tallstar daringly. "Please, if WindClan would allow me, I'd like to join your clan."

Silence followed. No cat spoke and Hopeflame held her breath. If they didn't believe her story, then she was done for. They *had* to believe her. Tigerstar said there would be consequences if she failed.

"You can't seriously believe that!" Crowfeather spoke up again. "She's a liar, Tallstar. TigerClan cats lie. Look what they did to ShadowClan and RiverClan; they'll do it to us too!"

Tallstar's amber gaze fell on her, filled with so many questions. She could see a war waging in his heart. He *wanted* to believe her, to help a cat in need...but he also had to protect his clan, and a spy amongst them could ruin their clan. Hopeflame prayed to something, anything, that Tallstar would believe her.

"Hopeflame...I sympathize with you, but I'm not sure that WindClan can take the chance of you living amongst us." Tallstar meowed evenly as he tried to hide his emotions.

"Please, Tallstar," She begged. "You're my last hope, don't send me back to TigerClan! Tigerstar will kill me!"

A golden-brown she-cat came to Tallstar's shoulder. Her eyes were filled with sympathy. "Come on, Tallstar. We can keep a close eye on her until she proves herself." The she-cat turned to her with curiosity. "We can't turn her away, StarClan would be upset."

Tallstar's shoulders heaved as he breathed out a long sigh. "Very well, Hopeflame, you can stay. But if you prove me wrong or break my trust, I will kill you myself. Are we clear?"

Hopeflame nodded and promised. "I understand, Tallstar."

"Your first few days here, you'll shadow Tawnyfur. Think of her as your mentor. You're not allowed to leave the camp without her." Tallstar meowed, blinking in affection at the she-cat named Tawnyfur. She guessed that they were mates.

"Of course, anything you say." Hopeflame saw the scowling WindClan cats become indifferent. They wouldn't disobey their leader. Over time, she knew that she would win them over. "You have my word."

~

A/N
A shorter chapter but please vote/comment!

Chapter 10

[image]

Hopeflame woke the next morning and almost forgot where she was. Gasping, she sat up lightning fast and looked around in a panic. Then she remembered. She was in WindClan, a spy for Tigerstar.

The russet she-cat emerged from the warriors den and stepped into the pale sunlight. Her russet fur gleamed like fire and her bright green eyes shimmered. She made her way to the fresh-kill pile and saw that there were only rabbits. Well, she's eaten just about every kind of prey in the forest, at least rabbits were familiar.

She plucked one of the smaller rabbits and carried it to the edge of the camp to eat in peace. Hopeflame gnawed on the meat and watched the WindClan cats wake up. Deadfoot was already out and about, sending cats on patrols. There were so few of them compared to TigerClan, it would be nothing to squash them.

It made her seriously wonder why Tigerstar would bother sending her here. If it would be so easy to take over WindClan, then why waste time for information that's not really needed? Did he find amusement in keeping her away from her family? Perhaps he didn't like the idea of her being with his son? But if that were the case, why risk her being killed after everything she's done for TigerClan?

"Hopeflame," Tawnyfur meowed as she padded over. The golden-brown she-cat's amber eyes were alight with energy. Her nimble frame made her seem breakable, but that was probably far from the truth. How was she going to keep up with these cats? "We're going hunting with Whitetail and Gorsefur. They're more willing to open up to you."

She finished the last bit of her rabbit and sat up. Hopeflame licked the blood from her lips and watched a small white she-cat approach with a long-legged tabby tom. "Okay, I'm ready, but don't expect me to keep up."

Tawnyfur purred with amusement. "We'll try to go slow for you."

Hopeflame sprang to her paws and followed Tawnyfur to meet Whitetail and Gorsefur halfway. Whitetail offered her a friendly nod while Gorsefur didn't even glance at her. Oh well, there were worse things he could do. They left the camp together but almost immediately the WindClan cats broke into a run.

She sprinted to catch up, but her body was not made for running. Their bodies were sleek with long legs in proportion to their frames with short coats that minimized friction with the wind. Her body was made for climbing and even for swimming. Hopeflame shared the strong hindquarters from the old ThunderClan blood and long fur meant to blend in with the shadows. WindClan was the last place she belonged.

The WindClan cats slowed down a little which allowed her to catch up. In broad daylight it was easier to notice slight differences in landscape. They passed a small stream that fell from a short, rocky, spring-fed waterfall. By the waterfall was one single tree that stood alone in the barren landscape. Hopeflame missed the forests in TigerClan.

"Where are we going?" She asked Whitetail.

Whitetail didn't look at her and answered while they moved at a brisk pace. "Towards Barley's farm. He let us hunt there once in a while. Another patrol was sent to the rabbit warrens."

Hopeflame faintly remembered Graystripe talking about Barley. He was the tom that had taken in Ravenpaw after he fled ThunderClan and Tigerstar's murderous rampage. Perhaps she could find answers there and maybe even ask Barley about Graystripe and Fireheart. She yearned for a better understanding of the events that led to TigerClan and Tigerstar's reign. Ravenpaw was the last one that knew what happened.

She happily followed the WindClan cats across the moors. They passed a small cluster of trees and in the distance, she could see a line of trees. Tawnyfur explained that Barley's farm was just past those trees. Tallstar and Barley were actually good friends,

Tawnyfur had told her.

When they reached the tree line, Hopeflame relaxed a little. She felt safe finally underneath the canopy and among the shade. The WindClan cats seemed much more reserved and nervous under the trees. For the first time since she's arrived in WindClan, she felt superior.

The trees thinned up ahead to reveal a clearing. On the other side of the clearing was a large abandoned twoleg shelter. It didn't look like a regular den in the twolegplace. Tawnyfur led the way across the clearing to the barn entrance.

"Tawnyfur, Whitetail, Gorsefur!" From the shadows of the barn, a black and white tom appeared. His eyes seemed friendly and his body posture told Hopeflame that he was relaxed. He didn't seem hostile at all.

"Barley," Tawnyfur purred. "We came to visit and possibly bring back a few mice."

"Of course, anything for WindClan." Barley answered in a calm tone. Then he peered past the WindClan cats at her. "A newcomer?" He wrinkled his nose. "She doesn't smell like WindClan or any clan I know."

Hopeflame flattened her ears, slightly offended. "I come from TigerClan. I joined WindClan only yesterday to escape. My name is Hopeflame."

Tawnyfur nodded to reassure Barley. "She's a refugee. It seems that Tigerstar's grip has reached into RiverClan."

"RiverClan is dead?" A new voice spoke from the shadows. A pair of eyes blinked at her which alarmed her. Then a body claimed the pair of eyes and emerged from the shadows of the barn. This tom was sleek and all black except for the white tip at the end of his tail.

Hopeflame's heart lurched as she realized who stood before her. This must be Ravenpaw. It was strange seeing him face to face, she imagined him a bit more...rugged. He had a kind face but a few

scars criss-crossed his pelt.

She was the one who answered him. "I first escaped to RiverClan but then TigerClan Merged with them. It forced me to seek out WindClan."

Ravenpaw blinked his eyes slowly as he seemed to be trying to grasp the truth. "WindClan is all that stands between Tigerstar and this farm." He spun on Barley, a fearful fire in his eyes. "He'll kill me!"

"I won't let that happen, Ravenpaw," Barley whispered to the younger tom. Then he turned to the WindClan visitors. "Please, come inside. I've many questions."

~

A/N
Ravenpaw :(I still miss him from the first arc. Please vote/ comment.

Allegiances Updated

[image]

Key
[T] Previously ThunderClan
[S] Previously ShadowClan
[R] Previously RiverClan

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws [T]
Deputy-Brambleclaw: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes [T]
Advisors-
-Whitestorm: big white tom [T]
-Blackfoot: white tom with black paws [S]
-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat [R]
Healers-
-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom [R]
-Runningnose: small gray and white tom [S]
-Mapleheart: ginger and white she-cat
Warriors-
-Frostfur: white she-cat with blue eyes [T]
-Oakfur: small brown tom [S]
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat [T]
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat [S]
-Blackclaw: smoky black tom [R]
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks [S]
-Stonefur: gray tom with battle-scarred ears [R]
-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat [R]
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes [T]
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom [S]
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat [S]
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom [T]
-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat [T]
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom [S]
-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat [S]

-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws [S]
-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat [T]
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes [T]
-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom [T]
-Loudbelly: dark brown tom [R]
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat [S]
-Swiftwind: black and white tom [T]
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Ashfang: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes [T]
-Rainwhisker: black tom [T]
-Sorreltail: tortoiseshell and white she-cat [T]
-Cedartail: dark brown tabby tom [S]
-Rowanclaw: ginger tabby tom [S]
-Tawnypelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [T]
-Stormblaze: dark gray tom with amber eyes [R]
-Owlgaze: light brown tabby tom with green eyes
-Ravenflight: black tom [S]
-Cloverpetal: black and white she-cat with green eyes [S]
-Hollytail: light gray and white tabby she-cat [S]

Apprentices-

-Hailpaw blue-grey tom with amber eyes (mentor: Blackclaw) [R]
-Dewpaw: dark gray she-cat with white flecks and amber eyes (mentor: Thornclaw) [R]
-Turtlepaw: brown tom with golden-swirled stripes (mentor: Mousefur) [R]
-Shimmerpaw: pale gray she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Mosspelt) [R]

Queens-

-Darkflower: black she-cat (mother to Runningwind's kits: Ebonykit, Pinekit, and Smallkit) [S]
-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat (expecting Jaggedtooth's kits) [T]
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches (mother to Swiftwind's kits: Gingerkit, Beekit, Spottedkit, and Leafkit) [T]
-Ferncloud: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes (expecting Dustpelt's kits) [T]
-Featherstream: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (expecting Owlgaze's kits) [R]

Kits-

-Ebonykit: pure black tom (mother: Darkflower)
-Smallkit: very small tabby she-kit with white paws (mother: Darkflower)
-Pinekit: russet tabby tom (mother: Darkflower)
-Gingerkit: ginger tabby she-kit with green eyes (mother: Brightflower)
-Beekit: pale ginger tom with black stripes (mother: Brightflower)
-Spottedkit: tortoiseshell she-kit (mother: Brightflower)
-Leafkit: black and white tom (mother: Brightflower)

WindClan
Leader-Tallstar: black and white tom with a long tail
Deputy-Deadfoot: black tom with twisted paw
Medicine Cat-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom
Warriors-
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom
-Ashfoot: gray tabby she-cat
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat
-Tornear: tabby tom
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom
-Whitetail: small white she-cat
-Gorsefur: long-legged brown tabby tom
-Hopeflame: long-haired russet she-cat with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes, formerly of TigerClan
-Crowfeather: black tom with blue eyes
-Skybreeze: blue-grey she-cat with blue eyes
-Cloudpool: white tom
Apprentices-
-Eaglepaw: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail & white face (mentor: Onewhisker)
-Soarpaw: black and white she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Breezetail)
Queens-
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat (mother to Onewhisker's kits: Heatherkit, Larkkit, and Lilackit)
Kits-
-Heatherkit: dusky brown she-kit (mother: Runningbrook)
-Larkkit: light brown tabby she-kit (mother: Runningbrook)

-Lilackit: gray she-kit with brown points (mother: Runningbrook)
Elders-
-Morningflower: tortoiseshell she-cat

Cats Outside the Clans
-Barley: black and white tom that lives on a farm close to the forest
-Ravenpaw: sleek black cat who lives on the farm with Barley
-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat
-Free: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes
-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-cat
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-cat with white paws (expecting Oliver's kits)
-Oliver: pale gray tabby tom

Chapter 11

[image]

Barley led the clan cats into the warm twoleg barn. The shelter had hay everywhere on the ground and it stood tall and strong despite the few cracked windows. Hopeflame noticed mice dart among the hay and her belly rumbled. Her claws unsheathed and she longed to hunt.

Then her attention returned to Barley. He led them to a corner of the barn which was secluded by a wall of hay tied together by what looked like vines. Nestled in the hay were two she-cats. The first was a golden tabby and the other a black she-cat with white paws. The black she-cat looked heavily pregnant.

"Hopeflame, this is my mate, Butterfly, and our daughter, Maisie. The rest of our family is out hunting. They should return any moment." Barley announced. "For now, settle down. We have much to discuss."

The WindClan cats laid down beside each other but Hopeflame sat somewhere in the middle. Barley sat beside Butterfly and Ravenpaw settled beside her. The black tom seemed intrigued by her.

"So, you were born in TigerClan?" Ravenpaw asked her pointedly. The WindClan cats turned to her, obviously wanting to see what she said. This was a test.

Hopeflame nodded to Ravenpaw. "Yes, my mother is Sandstorm and...my father *was* Graystripe."

The WindClan cats started to whisper among themselves and Hopeflame pretended to ignore them. Ravenpaw didn't bat an eye. "What do you mean Graystripe was your father?"

"Well," Hopeflame shuffled her paws and looked up at Ravenpaw. "H-he died in the battle with TigerClan." She lowered her head, feeling outright distraught. "I miss him very much."

Ravenpaw seemed choked up and struggled to find words. "Graystripe was my friend. We were both friends with Fireheart who died too soon. You said your mother is Sandstorm?"

"Yes," She answered curtly.

"Maybe you could come back sometime and I can tell you about our friendship," Ravenpaw offered. Hopeflame met his gaze and saw a secret meaning beneath the surface. He wanted to talk to her in private without so many cats listening in.

Hopeflame purred, "I would like that."

Tawnyfur quickly changed the subject and turned to Barley. "TigerClan is pressing on our borders and we are all that stands in their way. I'm not sure how long WindClan will be able to hold them back."

"These are grave times," Barley murmured. "I remember another time when WindClan was forced to abandon their home..."

"Brokenstar was evil, there's no doubt," Tawnyfur agreed, "But Tigerstar is mad. Hopeflame, tell Barley about all the changes he's made!"

Hopeflame felt slightly uncomfortable talking under the pressure. "TigerClan doesn't believe in StarClan anymore and medicine cats are called healers. We don't have elders, cats serve until they die. Also, apprentices start training at four moons old."

Ravenpaw lashed his tail angrily. "He's breaking the Warrior Code! Everything that we feared is coming true." He spun on Barley angrily. "We should leave the farm while we can!"

"But Maisie can't leave," Butterfly argued, speaking for the first time. "She's too close to kitting!"

There was a flicker of motion at the barn entrance and they all tensed. Four cats appeared and stepped into the light. One of them looked awfully familiar and Hopeflame nearly choked on the air she breathed. It was Free, the tom she met near the Treecut place!

"What's going on?" A pale gray tabby tom asked, moving to Maisie's side. He licked between her ears, obviously her mate.

"WindClan is just visiting." Barley answered the tom. "They've brought a new member. Her name is Hopeflame." Then he turned to her. "Hopeflame, the pale gray tom is Oliver, Maisie's mate. The golden tabby tom is my son, Sunny. My daughter, Rosie, is the tortoiseshell and white she-cat. And my other son, Free, the long-haired gray tom."

Free's green gaze locked with hers and for a moment, the entire world fell away. They seemed connected by some invisible force, destined to keep meeting. Why was he here and who was he, truly? It was obvious he wasn't Barley's son by birth.

Rosie moved to Ravenpaw's side and snuggled into his fur. Sunny and Free didn't move, staying side by side like brothers do. Hopeflame wanted to say something to him. More than anything, she wanted to ask him why he looked so strikingly similar to Graystripe.

If Free recognized her, he didn't show it. He greeted her as if this was their first time meeting. Hopeflame started to gravitate closer to the WindClan cats. At least she knew who they were and where she stood with them.

"TigerClan is becoming stronger," Whitetail spoke up. "Tallstar asked us to come visit and ask if, when the time comes, if you'll stand and fight beside WindClan."

This alarmed Hopeflame. WindClan was seeking help from loners? She knew it wouldn't do them any good with TigerClan's superior numbers. Why would they even bother? It was a miracle that WindClan hasn't given in yet. Perhaps they were too prideful.

Barley stood up, a little taken back by the question. "You want us to fight alongside WindClan?"

Tawnyfur nodded, confirming what Whitetail said. "Even seven of you, excluding Maisie of course, could make a difference. You may not be warriors, but you're no strangers to fighting."

Before anyone could say anything further, Hopeflame spoke up. "No, absolutely not!" She stood up and surveyed the faces of Barley's family. She didn't want to be responsible for the betrayal of them too. "TigerClan is too strong. Seven more cats will not help. WindClan is doomed."

Gorsefur narrowed his eyes at her, speaking for the first time towards her. "You have no place to make that kind of decision. WindClan needs all the help that it can get."

"TigerClan is *three* clans big, for StarClan's sake!" Hopeflame growled. "Nothing WindClan could do will change the odds, and they're not good."

"I'll fight," Ravenpaw spoke up suddenly. He stood on his paws and glanced at Hopeflame, then Tawnyfur. "I'm not running away this time."

"I'll fight too," Free said, surprising Hopeflame. "If TigerClan takes WindClan, what's to stop them there? Ravenpaw's right, we can't run away. This is our home." Free met her gaze and she felt a chill race down her spine. They're all going to die.

Barley nodded in agreement. "Tawnyfur, tell Tallstar that we'll fight beside WindClan."

Hopeflame wanted to scream at them, to make them see reason. TigerClan couldn't be stopped, it was just *too* strong! They were all trying to brave but they would all become martyrs. And the truth about martyrs is that they die. She didn't want to see these cats perish because Tigerstar would show no mercy against loners.

"Excellent, we'll bring Tallstar the good news." Tawnyfur purred. The WindClan cats rose to their paws and Hopeflame readied to follow them.

She was about to exit the barn when she felt someone brush against her. Hopeflame looked up into the green eyes of Free. "Come back soon, we need to talk."

Hopeflame studied him with calculating green eyes. "Indeed we do."

Then she raced after the WindClan cats as they headed back to camp. A storm was brewing, and Hopeflame wondered if anyone would survive.

Chapter 12

[image]

A few days passed in WindClan and Hopeflame worked hard to earn their trust. After all the running it made her faster and she lost any hint of extra weight. She wasn't fat, she was far from it, but all the running made her leaner than she ever had been. Tawnyfur was a good mentor and was patient while teaching Hopeflame how to hunt on the moors.

Runningbrook, the clan's only queen, kitted and had four kits: three daughters and one son. Unfortunately, the tom-kit died soon after, leaving Runningbrook and Onewhisker distraught. The clan mourned him for a whole night in vigil; it was a sad thing to loose a kit.

Hopeflame didn't join them, she didn't feel that she had a right to. Not only that, but they kept asking for StarClan to watch over Swiftkit (Runningbrook felt she had to name him). She knew that Sandstorm believe in StarClan but she wasn't sure. If that were true, then why would StarClan allow Tigerstar to become leader?

Morningflower also joined the elders den which dumbfounded Hopeflame. TigerClan had no elders and to think a cat could just *decide* that they were too old to serve... It confused her beyond words.

Hopeflame was set to meet her contact at the border tonight. She had much to tell them. WindClan still watched her with unease and she couldn't blame them. After all, she knew what was coming and they had a reason to not trust her. She would end up betraying them just like RiverClan.

She watched the clan turn in for the night, settled in the shadows at the edge of the hollow. Tornear was on night watch and stood at the camp entrance. There was only one way out of the camp and that meant she would need to pass by him. Hopeflame waited until much of the clan was asleep.

Quietly, Hopeflame crept towards the camp entrance and Tornear spun on her. "Oops, sorry, Tornear. I didn't mean to startle you," She meowed softly. "I need to use the dirtplace."

He narrowed his eyes at her but let her pass. She slunk out of camp and raced away when he wasn't looking. Hopeflame flew over the moors, feeling like a flying eagle. She personally couldn't wait until the moors were a part of TigerClan's territory. It surprised Hopeflame how much she enjoyed to run without any trees to dodge.

She crested the top of the hill and looked down. The ground sloped down into the forests where she knew her contact would be waiting. Hopeflame approached the tree line confidently, knowing that no one had followed her.

A pair of amber eyes blinked at her from the shadows. Brambleclaw? The cat to step from the shadows was not Brambleclaw. It was Tigerstar. It startled Hopeflame how similar he looked to his son.

"Hello, Hopeflame." Tigerstar purred. "I hope that you have something to report?"

Slowly, she nodded, but she would *not* tell him about Ravenpaw. "WindClan has asked a group of loners to fight alongside them in battle. They're readying themselves, knowing that we're coming for them." Hopeflame rolled her green eyes and put on a show. "They're too proud to submit without spilled blood, but it will be *their* blood to be spilled."

A wicked grin found Tigerstar's lips. "Excellent. And they trust you?"

"They're wary, but they trust me enough." She reported, and a question lingered in her mind. "Tigerstar, may I ask you a question?"

Tigerstar's whiskers twitched and he unsheathed his claws. "That depends."

"Well, WindClan could never pose a threat to TigerClan. There's

nothing they could do that would change the odds in their favor..." Hopeflame paused and looked up at the powerful tom. "My question is: why send me to WindClan at all?"

Tigerstar pretended to ponder her question. He already knew the answer but was holding back. "You have been honest with me, Hopeflame, and so I'll be honest with you. I sent you to WindClan as a test."

"A test?" She wondered.

The dark brown tabby tom dipped his powerful head. "After the Merge with RiverClan, it was obvious how torn you were. I thought that finding out that your father was Graystripe might've shaken your loyalties. It was necessary for me to see if you would follow my orders despite what you felt."

"TigerClan doesn't *need* intel, but I found it a fitting test." Tigerstar's amber eyes gleamed, reflecting the moonlight. "I see the way you are with Brambleclaw. He is my son, my legacy, and I guess that I wanted to protect that. If you two were to have kits, I had to know for sure that you would choose him, choose TigerClan."

Tigerstar dipped his head to her. "I now know that you are good enough for Brambleclaw. If he weren't my deputy, I would choose you."

Hopeflame's jaw hung agape in shock. It surprised her, all the things that Tigerstar told her. She knew it all along that being in WindClan was pointless. To hear the powerful TigerClan leader compliment her so directly...it left her feeling uncomfortable as she remembered all the times she nearly *did* turn her back on TigerClan.

"T-Thank you, Tigerstar," She dipped her head. "I am honored to serve TigerClan." Then she lifted her eyes. "When can I come home?"

Tigerstar's shoulders shook as he chuckled. "When WindClan Merges. I still need you there for intel." He gave her a sideways glance. "When TigerClan attacks, I want *you* to take Tallstar's life."

Hopeflame's heart sunk. Her mind flew back to the RiverClan Merge. Tigerstar had made her take Crookedstar's life. The look of betrayal on the RiverClan leader's face broke her heart. That day had left her broken and she didn't know if she would ever truly heal from the wounds in her heart.

"He has two lives left." Hopeflame told Tigerstar, a slight quiver in her voice.

"Perfect, one for you and one for Brambleclaw." Tigerstar purred. "TigerClan attacks the night of the first snowfall."

Hopeflame nodded, "Very well, I'll meet the clan here at moonhigh the night of the first snowfall."

Chapter 13

[image]

The cats in WindClan closest to her age were Crowfeather, Skybreeze, and Cloudpool. Both Crowfeather and Cloudlool were extremely uneasy around her, but Skybreeze seemed somewhat accepting. The blue-gray she-cat ate most of her meals beside Hopeflame, and she wondered if it was because she felt bad for her.

Either way, Hopeflame was glad for the company. She woke late the next morning, exhausted from her night visit to the border. The clan was already up and busy accomplishing their daily tasks. Mudclaw, Ashfoot, Tornear, Breezetail, and Soarpaw were returning from the dawn patrol. Tawnyfur ate alongside her mate, Tallstar, and Runningbrook's kits were exploring outside the nursery.

The three she-kits have been named Heatherkit, Larkkit, and Lilackit. Even though they were only a quarter moon old, they were already so filled with adventure. Larkkit was the little ringleader and they always seemed to find trouble. Hopeflame knew that they would make great additions to TigerClan.

"Hopeflame!" Skybreeze called as she bounded over. "Do you want to come hunting with me and Crowfeather?"

She hesitated since she knew how Crowfeather felt about her. But it was a fact that not everyone would like or trust her. "Okay, where are we going?"

"The rabbit warrens," Skybreeze answered excitedly. Her tail waved in excitement as she trotted to the camp entrance. "Leaf-bare is coming and the clan needs to prepare."

A chill raced down Hopeflame's spine. When the first snow fell, WindClan would fight for their lives. She didn't want to drag Barley's family into this as it was already going to be messy enough. Her mind flew back to Free and she decided to go visit him soon. She needed answers from him and Ravenpaw.

Crowfeather approached them and wrinkled his nose at the sight of her. "You invited *her*?" He cast a disgusted look in Hopeflame's direction, causing her to bristle with indignation.

Skybreeze gave Crowfeather a look. "Please be nice? Can't you see how hard she's trying to fit in? She's even starting to look like a WindClan cat!"

Hopeflame snorted at Skybreeze's naive comment. She would *never* look like a WindClan cat. Her body was too stocky with strong hindquarters and shoulders. Not to mention her long fur. No cats in WindClan had long pelts.

The black tom muttered something under his breath but didn't argue further. Satisfied, Skybreeze led their small patrol out of camp. They ran together over the moors and Hopeflame fluffed out her long pelt. There was a deep chill in the air and frost clung to the grass. Leaf-bare was certainly on its way.

Overhead, the sky was a dull gray color and the moorland grass was browning. Whenever Hopeflame passed the forest, she could see that the leaves now exhibited the bright colors of leaf-fall. She missed the forest and all it's hidden beauties. The moors still looked the same to her wherever she went.

Soon they reached the rabbit warrens and immediately started to hunt. WindClan cats relied mostly on partner hunting since it was difficult to chase down a rabbit by yourself. Hopeflame pricked her ears and saw a lone rabbit nibbling on the grass. Crowfeather directed them into position with mere tail signals. Skybreeze started to circle around the rabbit. She would strike first, driving the rabbit towards Hopeflame and Crowfeather.

Hopeflame ducked down with her belly fur brushing the moorland grass. She flattened her ears against her head and lowered her tail to the ground. If the rabbit happened to look over here, it wouldn't see her or Crowfeather who was copying her motion. They were invisible to the rabbit.

Out of nowhere, Skybreeze shot from her hiding spot and charged the rabbit. Startled, it took off in the opposite direction, heading

straight for them. Hopeflame unsheathed her claws, prepared to strike. When the rabbit got close enough, both she and Crowfeather lunged. The black tom pinned it down while she took it by the throat. The rabbit struggled but was soon dead.

"Good job!" Skybreeze exclaimed as she trotted over, an excited gleam in her blue eyes. "That rabbit never stood a chance!"

"Are there any more?" Hopeflame wondered, looking around. She couldn't see of smell any. It had been a rush hunting the rabbit and she wanted to do more.

"I think we scared all of them into their burrows." Crowfeather told her. For once his voice didn't drip with disdain and his blue eyes weren't cold and unfriendly. He seemed to be looking at her, *really* looking at her. When WindClan Merged, Hopeflame wondered if she and Crowfeather could be friends.

Skybreeze prodded the rabbit. "This ought to be big enough for a few cats. There are other hunting patrols who I'm sure caught more."

Crowfeather nodded in agreement. "Let's head back." He picked up the rabbit and led them back to camp. Hopeflame fell into step beside Skybreeze.

The blue-gray she-cat looked at her in curiosity. "What is TigerClan like, Hopeflame? If they take over, will they kill any of us?"

Hopeflame could tell that Crowfeather was listening in the way his ears were turned. She had to choose her words carefully. "When the other clans Merged, Tigerstar only killed cats that wouldn't submit. Do yourself a favor and if TigerClan does take over, just submit."

"Is that what you did?" Crowfeather asked her after setting down the rabbit. He turned around to face her with questions swirling in his blue irises. "If you're telling us to submit, then you're going against your own advice by being here."

Hopeflame flattened her ears, unsure of what to say. "I ran away because I'm hoping that WindClan could escape. TigerClan is strong,

too strong for only one clan to handle. Even if you gathered all the loners you could find, you wouldn't be covering half of the TigerClan warriors. Tigerstar killed my father and he's threatened to kill everyone I love more than once."

"Then if TigerClan takes over, I'm not going to accept that." Crowfeather growled. "I'd rather go down fighting than live a life of oppression."

"Don't talk like that, Crowfeather," Skybreeze murmured. "We could always run away..."

Crowfeather stared at her for a moment before picking up the rabbit again and continued back to camp. Hopeflame walked alongside Skybreeze who seemed genuinely frightened. This is what Tigerstar's rampage has caused.

Hopeflame decided that tonight she would go speak with Ravenpaw and Free. She needed answers more than ever.

Chapter 14

[image]

By the time the sun started to set, Hopeflame was anxious to leave for Barley's farm. She watched much of the clan turn in for the night with Whitetail on guard at the entrance. The white she-cat walked away for a moment to say something to Webfoot and Hopeflame took her chance.

She slipped out of the entrance without anyone noticing and she flew over the moors. By now, she knew her way around and followed her instincts. The sun was setting behind the forest, setting the sky ablaze with every shade of orange, pink, and violet. Hopeflame paused for a moment to watch and wished she could capture the sight before her.

Then she kept moving. She passed the small stream and charged over the hills. Her long-haired pelt blew in the wind and she shivered. As soon as the sun set, the world became noticeably colder. It was the first sign that leaf-bare was on the way.

She reached the top of the horizon and saw the faint smudge in the distance that was the tree line. Beyond that was the barn. Hopeflame let her legs carry her down the slope towards the trees. She felt free out here with nothing to block her path. It felt like she was flying.

Hopeflame slowed to a brisk trot as she approached the trees. She slipped amongst the shadows and found the clearing on the other side. The barn stood solitary against the now inky black sky. Taking a deep breath, Hopeflame walked up to he barn entrance.

Peeking inside, she was greeted by darkness. Only a hole in the ceiling allowed for some moonlight to filter in. She heard something move behind her right before something crashed into her and pinned her down. Snarling, the cat moved closer to study her face. They recognized each other at the same time.

"Hopeflame?"

"Free?"

The long-haired gray tom let her up and she shook out her straw-covered pelt. He watched her with inquisitive green eyes that matched hers almost perfectly. From behind the shield of hay, Rosie emerged, claws sheathed. She obviously expected to walk into a fight, but calmed when she saw Hopeflame.

"What are you doing here?" Fee asked her pointedly. He tipped his head to the side as he studied her. She could see in his eyes that he pondered their similarities just as much as she did.

"Actually, I came to talk with you and Ravenpaw," Hopeflame told him.

Rosie stepped closer and sniffed at Hopeflame. "Come visit in the hay. Whatever you need to say in front of them can be said in front of all of us."

Free nodded his head in agreement. "Yes, come rest." The dark gray tom ushered her to the corner of the barn where the rest of their little family waited.

Barley stood up in surprise and greeted her. "Hopeflame? What are you doing here this time of the night?"

"I came to speak with Ravenpaw and...well, Free." Hopeflame glanced at the dark gray tom, studied the dark dorsal stripe along his spine, their same forest green eyes... The similarities between him, her, and Graystripe couldn't be a coincidence.

Barley glanced at Ravenpaw who sat beside Rosie. "You asked her to come?"

The black tom stood up and dipped his head to Barley. "Yes, she seemed to be looking for answers and so was I." Ravenpaw shot her a look. "I thought we could help each other."

Hopeflame studied their faces and then she looked at Ravenpaw. "I want to know what happened with Tigerstar. Everything."

Ravenpaw let out a long sigh. "Well, you'd better get comfortable because it's a long story." Then he began:

"I was a moon older than Graystripe and Fireheart. My mentor was Tigerstar, Tigerclaw at the time. The day that Fireheart arrived in ThunderClan, he was a kittypet by the name of Rusty. Bluestar gave him the name Firepaw. Anyways, that same day, I was on patrol with Tigerclaw and Redtail, who was deputy at the time. We got into a border fight with RiverClan, the leader of it was the deputy, a tom named Oakheart."

"Tigerclaw was hungry for power, and he thought that if he killed Redtail that Bluestar would make him the deputy. So he killed Redtail and Oakheart was only collateral damage. I watched the entire thing happen from the bushes and I raced back to camp. I was so afraid..."

"I came back to camp and told the clan that Redtail was dead, but I was never able to tell them who killed Redtail. Tigerclaw told them that Oakheart killed him. Bluestar made Lionheart, Graypaw's mentor, deputy instead of Tigerclaw. I lived in fear of Tigerclaw because he knew that I knew the truth. After much persuasion, I finally told Firepaw and Graypaw what I saw. They helped me escape here and told the clan that I died at the claws of a ShadowClan warrior."

"Fireheart and Graystripe tried to tell Bluestar, but every time they tried Tigerclaw got in the way. Lionheart died in battle and Bluestar made Tigerclaw deputy. Meanwhile, Graystripe left ThunderClan to live in RiverClan with his kits. One day, Tigerclaw sent out all the warriors and Fireheart guessed at his plan. He returned to the camp to find it overrun with Tigerclaw and a band of rogues."

"Graystripe and a patrol of RiverClan cats were on their way to discuss something with Bluestar and they jumped in to help. Fireheart found Bluestar cornered by Tigerstar in her den and that's when Tigerstar killed them both." Ravenpaw dipped his head, overwhelmed by his emotions. "Fireheart was my friend. He saved my life, him and Graystripe. I owed them everything and I never got to pay them back."

"That's when Sandstorm and Graystripe grew close. She was soon expecting kits..." Ravenpaw glanced at Hopeflame, "You and-" His gaze found Free sitting beside her, "You."

The world around Hopeflame started spinning. This couldn't be true... How could she have a littermate that she never knew about?! How could Sandstorm keep this from her?! Her green eyes locked with Free's and he looked equally as shocked.

"But how?!" Free demanded Barley and Butterfly, the cats who raised him. "I knew I wasn't yours by birth, it was obvious. I looked nothing like any of you, but how could you keep this from me?! Didn't you think that I deserved to know where I came from?"

Hopeflame shook her head in disbelief. "Why would Sandstorm not tell us? Why would she give him up?" But one look at Free and it was obvious. He was an *exact* copy of Graystripe. The entire clan would've been able to know who their father was.

"Actually, it was Sandstorm's wish to keep you in the dark," Butterfly whispered. Her real kits, Sunny, Rosie, and Maisie, moved closer to comfort her. "She knew that you would be safer here, away from Tigerstar's grip. That why we never told you that you were a clan cat."

"I can't believe she never told me. I wonder if Graystripe ever knew he had another son..." Hopeflame murmured. She raised her eyes to Free. From the first time she met him, she *knew* that they were connected somehow. "You're my brother..."

Free stood up and started pacing. "I'm not some random kit that showed up at the barn...I'm a *clan cat.*" He met her gaze and she saw pain and sorrow. "I wish I would've known..."

Hopeflame moved closer of him, wanting to touch him, feel him, to see if he was real. Their fur brushed and they both jumped. "Our mother's name is Sandstorm. She's a pale ginger tabby with green eyes like us. Graystripe was our father, but he was killed in the Merge. He looked, well, exactly like you. We have two littermates: Owlgaze and Maplepaw. Oh, and two half-siblings: Stormblaze and Featherstream."

"I have a whole family that I didn't even know about..." Free murmured sadly.

"Maybe you could meet them someday?" Hopeflame wondered.

She soon left with the truth a burden on her shoulders. Hopeflame would revisit him soon. After all, he was her long-lost brother.

Chapter 15

[image]

Hopeflame walked alongside Skybreeze. In front of them was Webfoot, Breezetail, Onewhisker, and Eaglepaw. They were out on patrol, and Hopeflame noticed how they were making their patrols bigger. WindClan feared TigerClan more than they would admit. She felt bad for them, but at the same time she knew it was necessary.

The patrol moved at a brisk pace, walking along the TigerClan border. Hopeflame kept glancing into the forest, half-hoping to see Sandstorm. She needed to talk with her mother. How many other lies has she told or kept from them? All the lies were piling up and sooner or later, they would spill.

Wind whistled in the trees, carrying colorful leaves from their branches to lay them softly on the ground. The tree branches were mostly bare and every morning frost clung to the grass. They could see their breath whenever they spoke and Hopeflame was grateful for her thick pelt. Leaf-bare wasn't far off.

Amongst the trees, Hopeflame noticed a flicker of motion. The WindClan cats stopped and faced the border. She stood with them, curious to see how this would play out. From the undergrowth stepped Blackfoot, Fawnstep, Longtail, Briarnose, Thornclaw, Tawnypelt, and Dewpaw. Hopeflame watched in horror as the WindClan cats sprang forward, setting off the TigerClan cats.

Webfoot lunged for Blackfoot, teeth bared. The two toms were locked in a deadly battle. Breezetail went for Fawnstep, Longtail and Briarnose tackled Onewhisker, and Skybreeze bravely lunged at Tawnypelt. Hopeflame was faced with Thornclaw and Dewpaw.

"Stay behind me Dewpaw," Thornclaw ordered. He circled with Hopeflame. Time to put on a good show. Thornclaw lunged first, and Hopeflame dodged him. Wow, spending time in WindClan has definitely quickened her reflexes!

She rolled onto the ground and landed with all four paws beneath her. Hopeflame realized, for the first time, what a great advantage she had over any opponent in battle. Her time in both RiverClan and WindClan has allowed her to adopt their battle styles. Combined with the already integrated talents of TigerClan and ShadowClan, she was nearly unstoppable. The ultimate warrior.

Hopeflame went at Thornclaw, her former mentor, and tackled him. They rolled together, locked in a clawing mess. It was necessary for them to fight with claws unsheathed otherwise it would give away her cover. She pinned Thornclaw surprisingly and clawed him across the face. He kicked out at her belly and sent her flying.

She landed on her paws, but barely. Thornclaw wasn't going to give in so easily. Suddenly, Webfoot yowled above the din: "Retreat WindClan! Retreat!"

Hopeflame pulled herself away from Thornclaw and followed the WindClan cats over the moors. She hated running, it made her feel like a coward. But what did she have to face? Their blows had been orchestrated, practiced. There had been no point to that border skirmish.

The patrol returned to camp with their pride battered except for Hopeflame. She only acted like it was. Tallstar appeared from his den, shocked at the sight before him.

"Webfoot, what happened?" Tallstar demanded an answer. The rest of WindClan gathered around.

The dark gray tabby tom sighed. "We got into a border skirmish with TigerClan. They put up a good fight and we were outnumbered. We were forced to retreat."

Alarmed whispers filled the camp as WindClan spoke out their fears. "What are we going to do, Tallstar?" It was Mudclaw to speak. "They outnumber us!"

"We need to prepare!" Breezetail growled, her tail lashing.

Tallstar nodded, "I agree. From now on, most of our energy will be

spent on battle training. Only a select few cats will spend their time hunting to keep up strength. Those cats will be Ashfoot, Tawnyfur, and Gorsefur. Everyone learns to fight, even kits." His sad amber gaze fell on Runningbrook who pulled her kits closer to her. "If this is our last stand, then we need to give it all we've got. Tigerstar won't wait much longer."

Not much longer at all, Hopeflame thought to herself.

"I'm sending Deadfoot, Tornear, and Hopeflame to reach out to Barley's family. We need all the warriors we can get." Tallstar demanded. "Starting tomorrow, WindClan prepares for war."

All the voices of WindClan rose up in one, deafening cheer. "WindClan! WindClan!" Hopeflame joined in, although she felt their efforts were to no avail. TigerClan would come from the forest like a dark tidal wave and wash the moors with WindClan blood. These were dead cats walking.

Deadfoot approached Hopeflame and gave her a nod. "First thing tomorrow morning, we head to Barley's farm. Tallstar wants them here in the camp."

Hopeflame dipped her head respectively to the WindClan deputy. "Of course." She didn't know why Tallstar sent her, but it didn't matter. Tomorrow she would talk Barley's family into walking into a bloodbath whether she wanted to or not.

~

A/N
This is a shorter chapter, but oh well. Please vote/comment!

Chapter 16

[image]

"Hopeflame..."

Her green eyes flashed and surveyed her surroundings. The forest around her offered little light and darkness seemed to creep towards her. Hopeflame's fur stood on end, spooked by the circling shadows. She remembered the last time she was here and shivered when she thought of the mysterious black tom.

"Hopeflame..."

Movement out of the corner of her eye made her jump. "Who's there?" Her voice quivered and she flattened her ears, slowly backing away.

Suddenly, the black tom stepped from the shadows. His eyes gleamed in the pale light as he took a step towards her. "Hopeflame. It's been a while."

"What do you want?" She growled, arching her back and flattening her ears.

"I want to reminded you of your promise to me, Hopeflame." The black tom growled, stepping so close that our faces were a whisker-length apart. "When the Merge is complete, I'll return. ."

He faded like mist, his eyes being the last thing she saw before she woke up.

~*~

Dawn came quickly and Hopeflame woke as the first rays of sunshine peeked into the den. She stretched and stepped into the sunlight. She tried to push her dream far from her mind. Deadfoot and Tornear sat outside the leaders den and conversed quietly with Tallstar. Hopeflame waited patiently and groomed her ears while she waited.

The WindClan deputy and warrior finished their conversation with Tallstar and walked over to her. "Ready?" Deadfoot mewed.

She leaped to her paws and followed them out of camp. Frost clung to the grass and their breath lingered in the air like fog. Hopeflame shivered and puffed out her thick pelt. She had an advantage over all the WindClan cats.

Leaf-bare wasn't far off. Soon the world would be blanketed in snow and WindClan's time would come crashing down. TigerClan would be complete. Tigerstar will have become the sole leader of all four clans. Hopeflame could finally be with Brambleclaw.

Deadfoot led the way over the moors, keeping a good pace despite his twisted paw. Hopeflame kept up with him and Tornear, squinting her eyes against the strong winds. The WindClan deputy slowed as they crested the top of the moorland. From here onwards, the ground sloped downwards to the thin tree line separating them from Barley's farm.

Hopeflame's heart twisted in her chest. This was it. She would need to convince Barley, Ravenpaw, Free, and the rest of them to fight with WindClan. Even if she knew it would end in bloodshed. How could she ask her brother to walk into this? She's only just met him and was already asking him to sacrifice everything!

The pair trotted towards the WindClan border. Hopeflame noticed a flicker of motion at the tree line and her fur stood on end. It was Sunny to step from the shadows. The golden tabby tom relaxed at the sight of them.

"Deadfoot, Tornear, Hopeflame, what a pleasant surprise!" Sunny purred, dipping his head in greeting.

"We wish to speak with Barley," Deadfoot mewed, getting to the point.

Sunny blinked in surprise but nodded. "Alright, follow me."

Hopeflame followed behind Deadfoot, Tornear, and Sunny as they approached the barn. Inside, it was considerably warmer and it

made sense to Hopeflame why they made this their home. She fluffed out her coat in an attempt to chase off the chills.

From behind the wall of hay, Barley stepped out with Free and Ravenpaw at his side. "WindClan!" Barley meowed in surprise.

Deadfoot greeted the loner and Hopeflame followed his lead. "Hello, Barley. We're here on behalf of Tallstar."

Barley narrowed his eyes, "I see... Come back by the others so we can speak comfortably." He led them behind the hay with Ravenpaw and Free at their flanks.

Hopeflame's eyes widened in surprise. In the curve of Maisie's belly were four tiny kits. At her side were Oliver and Butterfly. Rosie lay curled in the hay not far off, and the tortoiseshell she-cat raised her head when they appeared.

"Hopeflame!" Butterfly purred, jumping to her paws. "What a pleasant surprise! Hello Deadfoot and Tornear!"

"Wow," Hopeflame breathed with her green eyes fixed on the kits. "They're beautiful, Maisie..."

Seeing the kits made her remember Brambleclaw's promise to her. After all she's been through, it couldn't be too much to ask for a family? She wanted kits with Brambleclaw, to watch them grow into strong TigerClan warriors.

"So what is it that Tallstar wants from us?" Barley asked abruptly, settling down beside his mate.

Deadfoot cleared his throat and Hopeflame sat between the WindClan deputy and Tornear. "WindClan is on his alert. We are expecting TigerClan to attack soon and Tallstar's requested that you move your family into the camp as a precaution."

Barley nodded in understanding. "That will be difficult, Deadfoot. With Maisie's newborns I'm not sure if we can risk moving them."

"Then she can stay here with Butterfly." Deadfoot suggested, and Hopeflame heard the desperation in his voice.

Apparently, so did Barley because he looked upon the WindClan deputy in a new light. "Alright, I'll send Ravenpaw, Sunny, Free, Rosie, and myself." He turned his gaze to his daughter's mate. "Oliver, I want you to stay here with Maisie and Butterfly. To protect them."

It surprised Hopeflame how much Barley sounded like a leader. It made her realize how far the loner would go to protect his farm and family. Deadfoot rose to his paws and Hopeflame prepared to follow him.

"Maisie," Hopeflame asked the black queen. "What are the names of your kits?" She was curious.

Maisie answered eagerly. "Oliver and I've named them Luna, Hawk, Shadow, and Lion."

"Those are wonderful names," Hopeflame forced a smile before turning and following Deadfoot and Tornear. Behind them were Barley, Ravenpaw, Free, Rosie, and Sunny. She was leading them to their death.

Chapter 17

[image]

When Hopeflame, Deadfoot, and Tornear returned to the camp, Tallstar was there to meet them. With Barley, Ravenpaw, Free, Rosie, and Sunny at their side the clan curiously gathered around. Hopeflame noticed Runningbrook's three daughters emerge from the nursery only to be ushered back inside by their father, Onewhisker.

Tallstar dipped his head to Barley as he would another clan leader. "My old friend, thank you for coming." The two black and white toms could've been mistaken for kin, they looked so similar.

Barley stood tall and proud with Ravenpaw at his side. "WindClan is all that stands in between Tigerstar and my farm. We will fight to protect our home."

Tallstar motioned for Webfoot and Tawnyfur to step forward. "Webfoot and Tawnyfur will show you where you'll be stay. They'll make sure you're comfortable." The tall WindClan leader nodded to Barley and his family as Webfoot and Tawnyfur led them to the makeshift den.

Hopeflame watched them disappear into the den with a chilled feeling of foreshadow crawling up her spine. The first snowfall wasn't far off, and when that came, she would be forced to fight. She hasn't spent as much time in WindClan as she did in RiverClan, but she still respected these cats. How could Tigerstar expect her to take Tallstar's life?

But Hopeflame knew that she had to obey. If she failed Tigerstar, then she would surely be marked a traitor and killed. All that she's worked for with Brambleclaw would be over before it's even started. She couldn't fail Tigerstar, not now. It was almost over.

"Hopeflame," Skybreeze padded over with Breezetail at her side. The cream-colored she-cat still acted aloof around Hopeflame, but

she knew that not everyone would like her. As long as they didn't suspect her. "Do you want to come hunting with me and Breezetail?"

With nothing else to do, Hopeflame nodded. "Alright." She followed the blue-gray she-cat towards where Breezetail waited.

The three she-cats exited the camp and Hopeflame turned her eyes up to the gray sky. Clouds gathered overhead and blocked the sun behind their large plumes. Wind whipped against her face as she raced after Skybreeze and Breezetail who were already heading for the rabbit warrens. Her paws dutifully carried her across the moors. She was grateful for her long fur because it kept her warm in this wind.

Over the crest of the moors, Hopeflame saw the rabbit warrens. She trotted forward to stand alongside Skybreeze and Breezetail. Her sharp eyes spotted a rabbit in the distance as it nibbled on some grass. Hopeflame unsheathed her claws and dug them into the dirt.

"Skybreeze and I will come around the far side and we'll direct it towards you, Hopeflame," Breezetail decided.

Hopeflame settled down in the grass and made herself nearly invisible. She watched Skybreeze and Breezetail race in a big circle to come around the other side of the rabbit. They were careful to stay out of the rabbit's sight and it didn't even notice them.

In the blink of an eye, Skybreeze and Breezetail appeared and startled the rabbit. It took off in Hopeflame's direction and she prepared herself. When it neared closer, Hopeflame pounced and pinned it down beneath her thorn-sharp claws. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Skybreeze pin a second rabbit that they hadn't noticed.

Breezetail stopped at Hopeflame's side and took a moment to catch her breath. "Nice catch! Two rabbits will certainly be a nice addition to the fresh-kill pile. Let's head back, one of these rabbits should be given to our new guests."

Hopeflame nodded in agreement and picked up the rabbit by its

neck while Skybreeze carried the other. For a moment, Hopeflame's green gaze wandered over to the TigerClan border. WindClan had no idea the bloodbath they would be walking into. It would be easier if they just submitted.

There was a chill in the air and Hopeflame knew that the first snowfall wasn't far off. Then the moors would be painted crimson with blood.

~

A/N
Sorry for the long wait, I was struggling with writer's block. I haven't given up on this story and I plan to see it all the way through.

Chapter 18

[image]

Something disturbed Hopeflame in her nest and she slowly opened her eyes. There was a deep chill in the air and the wind screeched outside of the den. Hopeflame fluffed out her coat in an attempt to stay warm. Her eyes were tired and she attempted to fall back asleep.

Then a cold feeling came over her like a shadow and she gasped. Her eyes snapped open as she sat up abruptly in her nest. Sitting at the entrance of the den with eyes fixed on her was the black tom. Chills rushed up her spine when her eyes locked with his. For a moment, she was immobile.

The tom stood up and motioned for her to follow. Hopeflame glanced around her at the sleeping WindClan cats to find none of them awake. She cautiously followed the ghostly black tom out of the den only to be blinded by white light.

Large, soft flakes of snow fell from the dark sky overhead to cover the ground underpaw. Hopeflame stood frozen for a moment as she took in the sight. The entire WindClan camp was covered in snow. Leaf-bare was here. It wasn't yet dawn since the sky overhead was as black as the ghostly tom's coat.

"What do you want from me?" Hopeflame hissed under her breath. She directed the question at the black tom who she was becoming annoyed with."You keep bothering me but I don't even know your name!"

The black tom blinked slowly, calmly at her. "You may not yet understand this, Hopeflame, but you've been chosen. The clans are very delicate at the moment as is the balance between good and evil. I'm here to help you make the right decision. The choice is yours, Hopeflame." Almost as an afterthought, he added: "My name is Wrath."

Hopeflame scoffed with suspicion. "Wrath? What kind of name is 'Wrath'? And what do you mean I've been chosen? Who decides these things?"

"All you need to know is that every decision you make from here on out decides the course of history." Wrath narrowed his red eyes as if he was in deep thought. "Place yourself on the right side of history, the side that prevails. Or you could bring the downfall of everyone you love."

Wrath's form began to fade and Hopeflame frantically begged him to stay. She had so many questions! What did any of this mean? Why were these decisions being placed on *her* shoulders? She just wanted to live a peaceful life with Brambleclaw! Was that too much to ask?

"Hopeflame?" Free appeared behind her from the makeshift den, causing her to jump. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"Don't worry about it," Hopeflame took a deep breath and studied him. Tonight TigerClan would attack. He could die, they all could. She couldn't bear losing anyone she loved, and that included her long-lost brother. "Why are you helping us? Why won't you and the others just leave safely?"

Free's green eyes twinkled with amusement. "What, you think loners can't fight?"

"No!" Hopeflame's pelt burned with embarrassment. "I just...I don't understand why you would fight a battle that's not yours."

"But it is mine, Hopeflame." Free's eyes suddenly held wisdom beyond his years and he spoke in a voice heavy with knowledge. "I'm a clan cat. Besides, what will stop Tigerstar from claiming our farm? No cat will be safe. I'm not just fighting for WindClan, but every cat that's ever been oppressed."

Hopeflame looked upon her brother in a new light. Free was brave, not just brave but valiant. Just like Graystripe. He was willing to put his life on the line to help those less fortunate than him. She didn't know many cats that would do that.

"You're an honorable cat, Free." Hopeflame murmured, but she couldn't look him in the eye. "Our father would've been proud of you."

Free's eyes clouded with sorrow and regret. "What was he like?"

"Graystripe?" Hopeflame's mind filled with memories of him. Her heart became heavy with grief. "He was witty and valiant. It was hard not to admire him. He saved me from drowning once. But he was also compassionate and funny-he could brighten the darkest day with his humor."

"He sounds wonderful." Free purred with a tinge of jealousy. "What did he look like?"

For a moment, Hopeflame just stared at him. "He...he looked a lot like you and our half-brother, Stormblaze. Just with amber eyes."

They sat there, sharing stories of their separate lives. Hopeflame told him all about Sandstorm, Owlgaze, Maplepaw, Stormblaze, and Featherstream. She told him about the games she would play with Owlgaze and Maplepaw. Free shared with her his own tales of kithood and they both found one thing in common:

They wished they'd met sooner.

Chapter 19

[image] [image]

Night fell and Hopeflame restlessly waited for WindClan to fall asleep. She lay curled tightly in her nest to conserve warmth and listened to her denmates for snoring. Despite her calm demeanor, her heart was racing. If all went according to plan, she could be with Brambleclaw forever.

The snores and deep breathing of the WindClan warriors assured Hopeflame that they were asleep. Slowly and quietly, she crept out of the den and into the night air. It appeared that Onewhisker was guarding the camp entrance with quiet concentration.

Hopeflame silently made her way towards the entrance and waited. She had to think of a way of getting past him without raising suspicions. Just then, a noise came from the nursery and Onewhisker wandered off to check it out. Sighing with relief, Hopeflame made a dash for the entrance.

Outside the walls of the camp, the wind blew without mercy, cutting through Hopeflame's thick pelt. She narrowed her eyes against the stinging wind as she flew over the moors. Her paws barely touched the ground and she felt that she could race an eagle and win.

In the distance she could see the dark smudge of TigerClan's trees. The closer she got, the more she could feel the tension crackling in the air. Her heart was racing as she approached the tree line. This was it, the day that TigerClan prevailed.

Wrath's words echoed in her mind and she knew that she had to be on the right side of history. The side that prevailed. If she failed Tigerstar now, she would never get to be with Brambleclaw. Everything that she's worked for would crumble like ashes.

Hopeflame stopped at the edge of the forest and peered into the shadows. She couldn't see them yet, but she knew they were in their

way. Dawn would be nearing soon and WindClan would be waking. They didn't have much time.

Motion amongst the shadows caught her attention and she stood ready. Stepping from the undergrowth was Tigerstar with Brambleclaw at his side. The entirety of TigerClan stood behind them, ready to fight. Hopeflame's fur stood on end in awe.

"Hopeflame," Brambleclaw moved to her side and they brushed cheeks. "I'm so sorry for what I did to you..."

"You were only playing the role you were given," Hopeflame murmured. "I'm fine."

Tigerstar approached her with quiet authority and she dipped her head to the dark tabby tom. "You and Brambleclaw will take down Tallstar." Then he lifted his head to the rest of the clan. "Tonight we make history. TigerClan will prevail, united and stronger than ever!"

Most of the TigerClan cats cheered, but Hopeflame saw uncertainty in the RiverClan cats' eyes. She scanned the crowd for her loved ones, finding Sandstorm, Owlgaze, and Stormblaze. Something sinister flickered in Stormblaze's eyes, but Hopeflame pretended not to see it.

"Follow me!" Tigerstar took off with Brambleclaw and Hopeflame at his flanks. TigerClan followed behind them like a dark wave of shadows. The sun still hadn't risen, leaving the moors cloaked in darkness. Hopeflame led the way to the WindClan camp. She knew she could not falter, not know when she was so close.

Over the rise, Hopeflame could see the WindClan camp, nestled between the hills. For a moment, TigerClan stopped and peered down upon the last resistance. Everyone knew they didn't have a chance, but only Hopeflame considered the consequences. What would happen to Barley and his family when TigerClan won? What would happen when Tigerstar realized that Ravenpaw was alive?

"For TigerClan!" Tigerstar yowled before leading the charge down the hill. The clan chorused his words until their voices rose above

the wind.

In one heartbeat, TigerClan fell upon WindClan like hungry vultures. Onewhisker was tackled easily by Jaggdtooth and WindClan warriors appeared from the den. TigerClan warriors cut through them with no remorse and for a moment, Hopeflame was paralyzed with horror.

"Hopeflame!" Brambleclaw shook her in an attempt to snap her out of it. "Come on! We've got to find Tallstar!"

Hopeflame shook her head, pulling herself from the trance. "He'll be in his den. Follow me." She dodged throngs of clawing, yowling cats with Brambleclaw on her tail. Her green eyes stayed locked on Tallstar's den. One more act of treason then she could finally be free.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Blackclaw, Loudbelly, and Stonefur ambushed her. They knocked her into the crowd out of Brambleclaw's sight. She flailed in the air before falling. The breath was knocked out of her lungs and she desperately gasped for air. The three former RiverClan warriors circled her, vengeance in their eyes.

"You're the reason RiverClan fell," Blackclaw snarled. "Look at what you've done!"

"You betrayed us, Hopeflame," Stonefur growled, the fur on his back standing straight. "Crookedstar trusted you, RiverClan sheltered you!"

"And now you think that you can bring the downfall of WindClan too?" Loudbelly hissed angrily. "We can't let you get away with this- not again."

"You're just Tigerstar's weapon, bending to his every will!" Stonefur snarled. "You betrayed your own kin!"

Hopeflame struggled to her paws and prepared to fight for her life. There was nothing she could say to justify what she's done. Her eyes scanned the mess of fighting cats for Brambleclaw. Blackclaw

lunged for her and she dodged him easily, tossing him aside like a mossball.

"Tigerstar will kill all of you for treason!" Hopeflame screeched. Stonefur and Loudbelly dived for her with their claws outstretched. She pulled away with a few scratches to show for it.

While she was distracted, Blackclaw pounced on her and pinned her underneath his claws. She struggled against his grip, but he held her tightly. His claws pricked her skin, drawing blood that stained the white snow. Hopeflame tried to claw him, but there was no way to gain enough momentum.

"For Crookedstar." Blackclaw dug his fangs into her neck. But before his teeth could puncture an artery or her windpipe, a dark shadow flew from the crowd to collide with Blackclaw. Hopeflame's eyes widened when she realized the cat pinning Blackclaw down was Stormblaze.

"It was never the plan to hurt her!" Stormblaze yelled at Blackclaw.

Stonefur and Loudbelly came down on Stormblaze with the anger of a million adders. "Stormblaze!" Blood gushed from his neck and Hopeflame pushed past them to reach her brother.

"No, no, no!" Hopeflame wailed. She fell at his side as the chaos of the battle raged on. Stonefur, Blackclaw, and Loudbelly regressed back into the crowd, leaving her there by his side. "Stormblaze, you can't leave me! I never meant for this to happen!"

Despite the blood, Stormblaze somehow managed to speak. "I-It's okay...Hopeflame...I-I never wanted to hurt you..."

"Stormblaze," Hopeflame cried. "You can't leave. Featherstream needs you..."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"For what?" Hopeflame was perplexed. After everything that she's done, *he* was sorry?

Stormblaze raised his amber eyes to her. They were filled with

warmth and pain. "For not believing that you did everything you could to protect us..." He closed his eyes for a moment, causing tears to trail his cheeks. "I forgive you."

Then he drew his last weary breath and Hopeflame felt all of the rage, guilt, and sorrow overwhelming her. She felt trapped underneath a dark tidal wave without the means to move or breath. Her body became stiff and the battle around her faded away. It was just her and her sorrow.

"Stormblaze..."

Chapter 20

[image]

"Stormblaze!" Hopeflame wailed. She dug her claws into the dirt and released her screams to StarClan. In that moment, she wished with all of her being that there was a StarClan so that Stormblaze could be with Graystripe. Her cries were lost in the overpowering sound of battle.

"Hopeflame!" Brambleclaw suddenly appeared from the crowd, blood staining his tabby pelt. His eyes widened at the sight of Stormblaze. "What happened?" Hopeflame couldn't find the words. The pain was too unbearable. "Hopeflame!" Brambleclaw shook her, his amber eyes filled with concern.

"What do you think happened?!" Hopeflame hissed. "We're at the center of a war as slaves to a dark tyrant!"

Brambleclaw glanced around worriedly. "Don't let Tigerstar hear you say that."

"I don't care anymore!" Hopeflame screeched.

"Well, I do." Brambleclaw embraced her as the battle raged on around them. For a moment, Hopeflame let down her walls and gave in to everything she's been running from. "Come on, we've got to still find Tallstar."

Just then, Tigerstar's dark form appeared and his voice rang out across the clearing. "Submit WindClan! You've lost this battle!"

Hopeflame's green eyes surveyed the clearing to see that nearly every WindClan cat was pinned underneath the merciless claws of TigerClan warriors. They eventually stopped struggling, leaving Hopeflame to realize that it was over.

TigerClan won.

With a sudden panic, Hopeflame looked around for Free. If he was dead she didn't think she could go on. She found her brother in Sandstorm's careful grasp. The pale ginger she-cat was whispering something in his ear.

"WindClan cats, submit and join TigerClan. All blood relations can be forgotten. Together, we are stronger." Tigerstar's voice reverberated throughout the clearing. His amber eyes reflected the pale sunlight of dawn. "No more border skirmishes, no more competing for food...we'll be unstoppable."

"WindClan will never be a part of TigerClan!" Tallstar shouted from underneath Longtail's claws.

Tigerstar narrowed his eyes and purposefully approached the fallen WindClan leader. "You're only causing more pain for yourself and your clanmates." He looked around and noticed the other loners. His gaze locked on Ravenpaw and fires burned in his eyes. "Ravenpaw...you're alive."

"I passed on your secret Tigerstar!" Ravenpaw spit with rage. "Killing me won't bury the truth!"

"Take him prisoner. All the loners and Tallstar, too." Tigerstar growled. He proceeded to address the entire clearing. "Anyone else care to join them?" No one spoke, but Hopeflame itched to reveal the treasonous acts of Stonefur and the other RiverClan cats.

Tigerstar continued while everyone looked on either in fear or awe. "The first step in uniting the clans is to annihilate anyone who possesses treasonous thoughts."

He motioned Blackfoot, Longtail, Russetfur, Dustpelt, and Tawnypelt to bring forth anyone that Tigerstar deemed a traitor. He stood atop the place where WindClan called meetings with Brambleclaw sitting at the base. Everyone cleared a space for the accused to stand while the strongest TigerClan warriors stood guard at the edges of the clearing. Blackfoot dragged forth Tallstar while the WindClan leader struggled and hissed.

"Hopeflame," Tigerstar called her forward and she obeyed. The

crowd parted for her and she heard murmuring from some cats. "This young warrior has dedicated much to the cause of uniting the clans. To show my gratitude, I will allow her to be the one to take Tallstar's lives."

Some outright gasped but others stayed silent. The WindClan cats shouted and had to be held back by a wall of TigerClan cats. Hopeflame closed her eyes for a moment before approaching Tallstar. The black and white tom glared at her as if he was trying to maintain his dignity.

Hopeflame glanced up at Tigerstar who was watching her in curiosity. This was another test. He still didn't trust her after all she's done. That's when she realized for the first time that he would never trust her. He didn't trust anybody. What a sad existence he must live.

In the blink of any eye, Hopeflame slashed Tallstar's throat. Her claws dripped with blood that fell onto the pristine snow. Each droplet left its mark. The former WindClan leader stumbled and choked on his own blood. His body started to convulse leaving Hopeflame to conclude that he was losing a life. For a heartbeat his body was entirely still, then he breathed again.

Hopeflame wasted no time in tearing at his throat a second time. Her mind was oblivious to what she was doing. After the battle her heart felt numb. She wondered if she would ever feel again. Tallstar fell, dead, for the entire clan to see.

"Tomorrow all the prisoners will be executed." Tigerstar meowed coolly. "This includes Ravenpaw, Barley and his family, Deadfoot, Stonefur, Loudbelly, and Blackclaw."

Hopeflame frowned. How did Tigerstar know that they attacked her? Suddenly, Brambleclaw was at her side. "I told him what happened. I couldn't let them get away with hurting you."

She didn't say anything, merely scanned the clearing for the dead. There was Frostfur, Cedartail, Ashfoot, and Stormblaze... That reminded Hopeflame to find Free. She couldn't allow him to be executed tomorrow.

With ease she slipped through the crowd and saw Free being dragged towards one of the dens by Blackfoot and Jaggedtooth. Her heart started racing and she searched for Sandstorm. She found her mother whispering with Owlgaze on the other side of the clearing.

"Mother, we cannot allow Tigerstar to execute Free," Hopeflame whispered urgently.

Owlgaze seemed confused. "Who's Free?"

Hopeflame looked pointedly at Sandstorm. "Why don't you tell him, Mother?"

Sandstorm flattened her ears. "He's...he's your brother."

Owlgaze's jaw dropped in shock. "I have another brother? A real, full-blooded brother?!"

Sandstorm slowly nodded. "I had to send him away because he looks too much like Graystripe." Then she glanced at Hopeflame. "I won't let Tigerstar kill him. I promise."

Hopeflame stared at her mother, unsure if she believed her. "How do I know this isn't just another lie?"

"Because I'll always protect my kits," Sandstorm answered confidently. "Trust that."

"Stormblaze is dead," Hopeflame murmured sadly. "H-He saved my life..."

Sandstorm and Owlgaze became silent. Then Owlgaze gasped. "Who's going to tell Featherstream?!"

Hopeflame didn't say anything. After the battle she was tired and numb. It seemed like tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

Allegiances Updated

Key
[T] Previously ThunderClan
[S] Previously ShadowClan
[R] Previously RiverClan
[W] Previously WindClan

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws [T]
Deputy-Brambleclaw: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes [T]
Advisors-
-Whitestorm: big white tom [T]
-Blackfoot: white tom with black paws [S]
-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat [R]
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom [W]
Healers-
-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom [W]
-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom [R]
-Runningnose: small gray and white tom [S]
-Mapleheart: ginger and white she-cat [T]
Warriors-
-Oakfur: small brown tom [S]
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat [T]
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom [W]
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat [W]
-Tornear: tabby tom [W]
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat [S]
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks [S]
-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat [R]
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes [T]
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes [W]
-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom [S]
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat [S]
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom [T]

-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat [T]
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom [S]
-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat [S]
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom [W]
-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws [S]
-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat [T]
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Whitetail: small white she-cat [W]
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes [T]
-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom [T]
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat [S]
-Gorsefur: long-legged brown tabby tom [W]
-Swiftwind: black and white tom [T]
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Ashfang: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes [T]
-Rainwhisker: black tom [T]
-Sorreltail: tortoiseshell and white she-cat [T]
-Rowanclaw: ginger tabby tom [S]
-Tawnypelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [T]
-Owlgaze: light brown tabby tom with green eyes
-Hopeflame: long-haired russet she-cat with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes
-Free: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes
-Crowfeather: black tom with blue eyes [W]
-Skybreeze: blue-grey she-cat with blue eyes [W]
-Cloudpool: white tom [W]
-Ravenflight: black tom [S]
-Cloverpetal: black and white she-cat with green eyes [S]
-Hollytail: light gray and white tabby she-cat [S]

Apprentices-

-Eaglepaw: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail & white face (mentor: Onewhisker) [W]
-Soarpaw: black and white she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Breezetail) [W]
-Hailpaw blue-grey tom with amber eyes (mentor: Blackclaw) [R]
-Dewpaw: dark gray she-cat with white flecks and amber eyes (mentor: Thornclaw) [R]
-Turtlepaw: brown tom with golden-swirled stripes (mentor: Mousefur) [R]

-Shimmerpaw: pale gray she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Mosspelt) [R]

Queens-

-Darkflower: black she-cat (mother to Runningwind's kits: Ebonykit, Pinekit, and Smallkit) [S]
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat (mother to Onewhisker's kits: Heatherkit, Larkkit, and Lilackit) [W]
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches (mother to Swiftwind's kits: Gingerkit, Beekit, Spottedkit, and Leafkit) [T]
-Ferncloud: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes (mother to Dustpelt's kits: Spiderkit, Hollykit, Shrewkit, and Larchkit) [T]
-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat (expecting Jaggedtooth's kits) [T]
-Featherstream: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (expecting Owlgaze's kits) [R]

Kits-

-Ebonykit: pure black tom (mother: Darkflower)
-Smallkit: very small tabby she-kit with white paws (mother: Darkflower)
-Pinekit: russet tabby tom (mother: Darkflower)
-Gingerkit: ginger tabby she-kit with green eyes (mother: Brightflower)
-Beekit: pale ginger tom with black stripes (mother: Brightflower)
-Spottedkit: tortoiseshell she-kit (mother: Brightflower)
-Leafkit: black and white tom (mother: Brightflower)
-Heatherkit: dusky brown she-kit (mother: Runningbrook) [W]
-Larkkit: light brown tabby she-kit (mother: Runningbrook) [W]
-Lilackit: gray she-kit with brown points (mother: Runningbrook) [W]
-Spiderkit: lithe black tom with brown underbelly (mother: Ferncloud)
-Hollykit: brown tabby she-kit with amber eyes (mother: Ferncloud)
-Shrewkit: small dark brown tom with amber eyes (mother: Ferncloud)
-Larchkit: pale brown tabby she-kit with white paws (mother: Ferncloud)

Cats Outside the Clans

-Barley: black and white tom
-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat

-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-cat
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Oliver: pale gray tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-cat with white paws (mother to Oliver's kits: Luna, Hawk, Shadow, and Lion)
-Luna: silver tabby she-kit
-Hawk: brown tabby tom
-Shadow: black tom with white chest
-Lion: golden tabby tom

Chapter 21

[image] [image]

Dawn came the next day and Hopeflame stirred at Brambleclaw's side. Last night, Tigerstar had ordered that all traitors be kept in a separate area of the camp under strict guard. They still remained in the WindClan camp, but the plan was to return to Fourtrees today.

"Hopeflame?" Brambleclaw nosed her cheek, causing her to lift her eyes to him. "Are you okay?"

"No." She answered plainly. Her heart still felt numb after the death of Stormblaze. Not only had he been her kin, but he was her friend. Even though they had argued about her leaving for WindClan, he still loved her. He died for her. "I need to talk to Tigerstar."

Brambleclaw frowned with confusion. "Why? What's done is done. You don't have to worry anymore."

She stood up silently, her green eyes scanning the overflowing warriors den. "I need to bargain for my brother's freedom."

Brambleclaw jumped to his paws. "Owlgaze has been named a traitor?!"

Hopeflame shook her head quickly. "No, I have another brother. He fought alongside the WindClan cats."

Realization filled Brambleclaw's amber eyes. "I'll come with you."

Together, they emerged from the warriors den. The snow beneath their paws was almost entirely stained red with blood. Hopeflame saw a few warriors lining up the bodies of the dead at the edge of the clearing. The sight almost made Hopeflame sick.

They approached the leaders den where they found Tigerstar sitting at the entrance. "Brambleclaw, Hopeflame...good morning."

Brambleclaw moved closer to her so that their pelts brushed.

Hopeflame heaved a great breath before looking Tigerstar in the eye. "Tigerstar, you must know that I am completely loyal to TigerClan. I've sacrificed more than anyone else for the cause of unifying the clans."

Tigerstar nodded his large head. "Yes, no cat can ignore that."

"Then...I would like to ask one favor." Hopeflame tried to keep her voice from shaking and she lifted her head. "I bargain for the freedom of one of the prisoners."

Fury flared in Tigerstar's amber eyes. "How dare you?! Those prisoners would see the fall of TigerClan!"

"Please!" Hopeflame begged. "His name is Free and he has clan blood. He's my brother, Sandstorm's son! He was raised a loner and doesn't understand clan customs. If you release him, I promise to convert him into a fully-functioning TigerClan cat."

Tigerstar narrowed his eyes at her in disbelief. "Sandstorm had another son?"

Hopeflame nodded slowly. "She sent him away because otherwise the clan would know the true circumstances of our birth. He's the spitting image of Graystripe."

"And why would I risk freeing a cat who's loyalties would most surely be twisted?" Tigerstar quizzed her, but at least it showed he was considering it.

"Let me talk to him." Hopeflame asked respectfully. "Please. I've never asked for anything, Tigerstar."

Tigerstar was silent as if he were considering it. Brambleclaw glanced at her before stepping forward himself. "I'm sure once he learns the truth about his birth that he'll discover where his true loyalties lie."

Hopeflame stared at Tigerstar in desperation. She couldn't bare the thought of losing yet another brother. The pain of Stormblaze's death would haunt her for moons to come. Free deserved to meet their family like she promised.

"You may speak with him." Tigerstar stood and led the way across the clearing to the former elders den where the prisoners were being kept. Blackfoot, Whitestorm, and Russetfur were keeping guard. "Bring out the gray loner."

Whitestorm disappeared inside and returned with Free at his side. Free's green eyes locked on hers and she saw rage brewing there. It made Hopeflame feel sick to know that she's betrayed another cat that she cared about.

"Hopeflame here has bargained your freedom," Tigerstar growled at Free. "If you can swear your loyalty, then you'll be trained as a TigerClan warrior."

Hopeflame met his gaze in a pleading manner. Free approached her stiffly and the TigerClan cats parted for him. She led him a little ways away so they could speak somewhat privately.

"What are you doing with these TigerClan cats, Hopeflame?" Free demanded. "Was all of this a game to you? Do you always bargain the lives of your loved ones?"

"None of this is a game to me," Hopeflame growled. "I've spent most of my life trying to protect the ones I love. And now I'm trying to protect you." She let out a sigh and looked back up at him. "Listen to me, Tigerstar will kill you. The only way for you to live is for me to promise your loyalty."

"You shouldn't be making such promises." Free snarled, "What about my family, huh? Barley, Ravenpaw? Sunny and Rosie? They're going to be killed too!"

"But they're loners!" Hopeflame argued. "Tigerstar will never let them survive. But you...you've got TigerClan blood. There's hope for you to survive this."

"Maybe I'd rather perish with my family," Free growled. "My *real* family."

"You have a real family!" Hopeflame muttered under her breath. "You've got a mother, a brother, and two sisters besides me. They

deserve to know you."

Something like understanding filled Free's green irises. All sign of hostility disappeared. "I understand that, Hopeflame. But I can't stand by and watch my family be murdered."

"I wish that I could save all of you...but I can't." Hopeflame murmured, her eyes downcast. "Please, Free. I'm begging you. I've watched too many die already."

"I'd rather die than live under a malicious leader." Free responded bluntly.

Hopeflame's pelt prickled and she looked up at him suddenly. "Things might change, Free. Brambleclaw, the deputy, is a better cat than his father. In a few seasons, TigerClan could be honorable again."

"Why do you have so much faith in him?" Free wondered.

She glanced in Brambleclaw's direction to find him already staring at her. Tigerstar, Blackfoot, and Whitestorm were conversing quietly beside him. His warm amber eyes reminded her of the sun, filled with so much warmth and life.

Hopeflame met Free's gaze once more with unfaltering certainty. "Because I love him."

Chapter 22

[image] [image]

"I name these cats guilty of treason," Tigerstar's voice filled the entire WindClan camp. TigerClan cats lined the edges of the camp with WindClan and the prisoners at the center. Hopeflame sat beside Brambleclaw at the base of the rock where Tigerstar sat. "Stonefur, Blackclaw, Loudbelly, and Ravenpaw: you have gone against TigerClan and therefore shall be put to death."

Uproar came from the former RiverClan cats. They all argued against the treasonous acts of their clanmates, but Hopeflame knew the truth. Stonefur, Blackclaw, and Loudbelly had tried to kill her. If it wasn't for Stormblaze, she would be dead right now.

"Silence!" Tigerstar hissed.

"Its her fault!" Cried a few RiverClan cats as the motioned at her. "It's all her fault!"

Brambleclaw stood up to shield her from their verbal attacks. Blackfoot led the charge for the TigerClan cats to shut them down. A few scratches was all it took for the RiverClan cats to quiet themselves. They didn't want to suffer the same fate. Hopeflame buried her face in Brambleclaw's chest.

"Stormblaze, a very brave warrior, sacrificed his life for his clanmate." Tigerstar bowed his head for a moment. "He proved his loyalty to TigerClan with his last breath."

No, he just couldn't let them kill me, Hopeflame thought to herself. *He was never a TigerClan cat.*

"And in his honor, I would like for Hopeflame, Owlgaze, and Sandstorm to be the ones to execute Stonefur, Loudbelly, and Blackclaw." Tigerstar's words chilled Hopeflame to the bone. Hasn't she proven herself to him time and time again?

Hopeflame stepped forward from the crowd of TigerClan cats with Owlgaze and Sandstorm following her example. Sandstorm wore a stoic expression but didn't say anything. They lined up to face the cats they would be executing. Hopeflame found herself in front of Stonefur.

The gray tom had been so kind to her when she was a part of RiverClan. He treated her like an equal. She didn't blame that he wanted to kill her. She deserved it.

On Tigerstar's command, the three of them fell on the traitors. Stonefur didn't even try to fight back. He merely lifted his chin which made it easier for her to tear into his throat. Hopeflame backed off and watched his body convulse as blood poured from his throat. Why wouldn't he fight back? What was he trying to accomplish?

She noticed that it was the same with Blackclaw and Loudbelly, both of whom were now dead. Their blood pooled together at the center of the WindClan camp. The morbid sight made Hopeflame sick. She thought that she would be used to death by now.

"I will execute Ravenpaw," Tigerstar announced. He faced the small black tom with rage in his amber eyes. Ravenpaw was pinned down by Tigerstar's long, glinting claws. In one moment it was all over. When Tigerstar raised his head, Ravenpaw's blood dripped down his chin.

Sandstorm's mouth opened in a silent scream and Hopeflame moved closer to comfort her. Ravenpaw had been her friend. It made Hopeflame realize that she was the last cat who knew the truth about Tigerstar's treachery and how far back it really went.

"Barley, Sunny, and Rosie, you are exiled from TigerClan's territory." Tigerstar announced coolly. "If you set one paw here, your entire family will be destroyed." Then he turned his gaze to Free who sat in between Blackfoot and Whitestorm. "As for you...you are now a cat of TigerClan. One misstep and you'll be executed." Free nodded his head curtly but Hopeflame saw the fear in his eyes. What has she done?

"Now, TigerClan, we are united finally!" Tigerstar yowled to the skies and every cat joined in. Well, almost. Hopeflame couldn't bring herself to cheer. "Let us return to Fourtrees."

Every cat followed Tigerstar like shadows. Hopeflame found herself at Brambleclaw's side, but she was silent. She couldn't bring herself to speak. What would happen when she told Featherstream about Stormblaze's death?

"It'll be alright, Hopeflame." Brambleclaw murmured to her. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know," She replied quietly.

But it wasn't herself she was worried about.

Chapter 23

[image]

TigerClan returned to Fourtreees exhausted and battered. Tigerstar raised his head and immediately leaped onto the Great Rock. Every cat emerged to hear him, even the kits. Hopeflame settled beside Sandstorm, Owlgaze, and Featherstream. She needed the comfort of family. She noticed the healers, including Maplepaw, seeing to the severely wounded.

Tigerstar lifted his head proudly and called out to all the clan. "Cats of TigerClan, let this day be remembered. Our dream is complete, and we've created the perfect clan. No more border fights, no more competing for food. We will be the strongest clan to ever exist!" TigerClan cats cheered, but RiverClan and WindClan cats were mostly silent.

Hopeflame watched Tigerstar leap down from the Great Rock to whisper something in Brambleclaw's ear. She narrowed her eyes and stood up to approach Brambleclaw. The dark brown tabby from was conversing with Whitestorm and Mudclaw. It surprised Hopeflame to see the former WindClan warrior so engaged already.

"Hopeflame," Brambleclaw greeted her warmly. He glanced at the other two toms to bid them farewell. "Come with me."

Intrigued, Hopeflame willingly followed him across the camp to a small den tucked away in the corner of the camp. "What is this?" She asked him in confusion.

"It's our den," Brambleclaw beamed. "Well, technically it's mine because I'm the deputy, but I can share it with whomever I like." He kept rambling and Hopeflame decided to shush him by running her tail over his mouth.

"I love it." Hopeflame purred. She rubbed her cheek against his with deep affection. After all this time, they could finally be together. They could finally start a family...

"Hopeflame." Sandstorm appeared out of nowhere with an even, careful tone. "Someone needs to tell Featherstream and...well, you know her best."

Hopeflame glanced at Brambleclaw nervously. He nuzzled her cheek gently. "Go to her, I'll be waiting for you."

"Thanks, Brambleclaw," She murmured to him before turning to follow Sandstorm to the nursery.

While they crossed the clearing, Hopeflame noticed Maplepaw emerge from the healer den. Their eyes connected for a moment, but then Maplepaw disappeared again inside the den. Hopeflame's heart clenched with sorrow. How could she enjoy being home if her own sister didn't want her here?

"She still loves you," Sandstorm assured her. "It's just...well, it's been hard for her. She's a full healer now, you know."

"Really?" Hopeflame blinked in surprise. "What name did she receive?"

"Mapleheart," Sandstorm answered, then she walked off again towards the nursery.

For a moment, Hopeflame stood frozen at the center of Fourtrees. TigerClan warriors were keeping a close eye on the newly integrated WindClan cats, Tigerstar was speaking with his advisors, and the apprentices were beginning to mingle. She tried to tell herself that in a few moons everything would get better.

Hopeflame followed Sandstorm to the nursery where she found the queens and kits all resting inside. Darkflower was chastising her three kits, Ebonykit, Smallkit, and Pinekit, about playing too roughly. Runningbrook lay curled around her three daughters protectively. She probably felt out of place here. Brightflower's kits were suckling quietly and Ferncloud's newborn four were sleeping.

On the far side of the den, Cinderpelt and Featherstream talked in hushed voices. When Featherstream saw Hopeflame, she offered a small smile. Hopeflame took a deep breath and approached her

half-sister.

"Featherstream...can we talk?" Hopeflame forced the words out. She didn't want to admit to anyone that Stormblaze was really dead, especially her...

Frowning in confusion, Featherstream nodded. "Of course." She heaved herself to her paws and followed Hopeflame out of the nursery.

Hopeflame led her sister into the forest away from camp. They stopped in a hidden glen where the moonlight fell favorably upon the damp grass-the snow hadn't stuck. Featherstream's blue eyes were locked on Hopeflame, and she knew that sooner or later she would have to tell her.

"Featherstream..." Hopeflame took a deep, shaky breath. "During the Merge with WindClan...I was attacked by three RiverClan warriors. T-They wanted revenge. Stormblaze tried to defend me and...I'm so sorry Featherstream."

Featherstream flattened her ears against her skull. Her eyes were filled with uncertainty and fear. "What are you saying, Hopeflame?"

She lowered her head and closed her eyes for a moment. The sight of Stormblaze's blood was still fixed in her mind. Hopeflame raised her green eyes to look into Featherstream's blue ones.

"I'm so sorry, Featherstream, but...Stormblaze is dead."

Featherstream wobbled a little so Hopeflame moved closer to comfort her and to keep her from falling. The silver she-cat jerked to the side and threw up in the undergrowth. Hopeflame didn't know what to do.

"He's dead?" Featherstream rasped.

Hopeflame nodded solemnly. "He died a warrior's death, protecting me. Graystripe would've been proud of him."

"Don't you *dare* talk about Graystripe like you knew him!" Featherstream snarled. "You only knew him for a couple of moons

and then you doomed all of us! You should be dead, not Stormblaze!" Featherstream stomped off back towards the camp, leaving Hopeflame shaken.

Featherstream wasn't wrong.

Stormblaze didn't deserve to die.

She did.

Chapter 24

[image] [image]

Hopeflame stumbled back to camp with an aching heart. She couldn't blame Featherstream for the things she said. That didn't mean that it hurt any less. Despite everything that's happened, all the tragedies that have shaped them, Hopeflame hoped that she and Featherstream could remain friends. Clearly that wasn't going to happen.

Most of TigerClan had retired to their dens. Only a few remained out in the clearing, one of them being Brambleclaw. The dark tabby tom approached Hopeflame the moment she appeared at the entrance. He enveloped her in his embrace, the only place that she felt safe anymore.

"It's not your fault, Hopeflame." Brambleclaw assured her quietly. "You were just following orders. In a few moons, everyone will forget."

"I never will," Hopeflame admitted sadly. Her sorrowful heart was heavy with grief. She felt that she would never forget the faces of those she betrayed.

Brambleclaw lifted her chin with his paw so that she was looking into his eyes. "Let's get out of here for the night, you and me. We can sleep under the stars together."

Hopeflame's heart lifted a little, so she nodded. Brambleclaw led the way out of camp and into the forest. It was strange to know that there were no borders anymore. They could go anywhere they wanted from the marshes, the river, to snakerocks. There was comfort in knowing that.

Brambleclaw suddenly took off down a trail. "Race you to Sunningrocks!" He shouted over his shoulder.

Smirking, Hopeflame raced after him. They dodged trees and

bramble patches easily, weaving through the undergrowth like shadows. She followed Brambleclaw and let out a giddy laugh. Above the thick tree canopy, Hopeflame glimpsed pieces of Silverpelt.

She remembered the stories Sandstorm used to tell her and her littermates about StarClan. Graystripe had believed in StarClan, too. Could there really be cats in the sky watching over them? If there were cats in the sky, did they know her sins? Would she be punished for everything that she's done?

Brambleclaw pulled her from her thoughts when he appeared out of nowhere to pounce on her. They tumbled through the undergrowth before landing side by side in the soft grass. Their laughter bounced off of the tree trunks to fill this part of the forest. Even the wind seemed to be laughing with them.

Suddenly, Brambleclaw leaned closer to lick her forehead. Hopeflame's pelt became warm and butterflies swarmed in her belly. Her heart was racing and it surprised her that Brambleclaw couldn't hear it. Could he? Was his heart racing like hers? It was hard to tell if he was nervous.

She returned the gesture, licking in between his eyes. They nuzzled each other's necks. Being this close to his chest, Hopeflame could hear Brambleclaw's thundering heartbeat. Obviously he wasn't as calm as he seemed. She nosed his cheek gently and twined her tail with his.

Their heartbeats echoed each other's in a beautiful symphony that joined the music of the forest. Hopeflame moved as close as she possibly could until there was no space between them. Brambleclaw rose gently to hover over her. His amber eyes stared into her green ones which were to the likeliness of green-leaf leaves.

Brambleclaw leaned down so she could feel his warm breath on her cheek. "Do you trust me?"

Despite her pounding heart, Hopeflame knew the answer to that question. "Yes," She whispered. "I trust you."

In that moment, they became one. Their bodies met in a way that made Hopeflame blush. She never imagined it would be like this. But Brambleclaw was gentle and she wasn't afraid. Her heart raced against her ribcage. She raised her eyes to the stars.

"Hey, look at me," Brambleclaw murmured. "We're all that matter right now."

Brambleclaw filled her in ways that she didn't even know were empty. He gave her the pieces that she hadn't known were missing. Her breath hitched in her throat for a moment. Only the stars knew of their secrets.

Brambleclaw settled down at her side. Their breath created fog in the air, but Hopeflame didn't feel the chill. With Brambleclaw at her side, she knew she would never feel cold again.

"I love you, Brambleclaw," Hopeflame meowed sweetly as she gazed into his eyes.

He stared back and answered with the utmost sincerity: "I love you, too, Hopeflame."

Chapter 25

[image]

Hopeflame woke the next morning to find a thin layer of snow covering the ground as well as her and Brambleclaw. Last night, they had fallen asleep sharing each other's warmth. Even now, Hopeflame didn't feel the cold. She couldn't imagine ever being cold again after last night. The simple memory was enough to curl her toes and stir warmth in her heart.

She rolled over to face Brambleclaw who, she discovered, was already awake. His amber eyes were locked on her in a wholly loving way. "Good morning, Hopeflame." How words warmed her to the core.

"Good morning, Brambleclaw," Hopeflame giggled.

The sun had barely risen but there was enough light to see by. "I hate to be the bringer of bad news," Hopeflame sighed, "But we should probably head back to camp."

"Hmm, that is certainly bad news." Brambleclaw smirked before nuzzling her neck.

Hopeflame squirmed as she giggled at his antics. "Brambleclaw! You're the deputy, remember? You've got patrols to assign."

Brambleclaw's eyes were filled with a playful fire. "Tigerstar can do that if it's really that important."

"Brambleclaw..." She gave him a stern look that was playful in its own way.

Groaning, Brambleclaw finally stood up to stretch. "Alright, fine, but you're coming with me on my patrol."

"Deal." Hopeflame stood up and stretched as well. When she finished, she found Brambleclaw staring at her. "What?"

"You're just so beautiful," Brambleclaw told her. "I wonder every day how I could ever deserve you."

Hopeflame's pelt became flushed with embarrassment. She moved close to him and pressed her forehead to his. "I'm right here, Brambleclaw, and I'm not going anywhere."

Together they walked back to camp closer than they've ever been. The world seemed brighter somehow, almost as if the world could end tomorrow and she wouldn't be afraid. With Brambleclaw at her side, she could do anything.

They returned to find the clan fully awake. Warriors waited around for their patrols. Some looked a little annoyed to be kept waiting. Brambleclaw approached them confidently while Hopeflame followed a little sheepishly.

"Longtail, take Mosspelt, Onewhisker, Sorreltail, Owlgaze, Eaglepaw, and Shimmerpaw to patrol the Thunder border. Russetfur, take Mistyfoot, Runningwind, Whitetail, Thornclaw, and Dewpaw to patrol the Shadow Border." Brambleclaw paused for breath and surveyed the remaining cats.

"Leopardfur, take Brackenfur, Sandstorm, Whitethroat, Mousefur, and Turtlepaw to patrol the River Border. Mudclaw, take Fawnstep, Dustpelt, Hollytail, Rainwhisker, and Hailpaw to the Wind Border." Then he looked around once more.

"Brindleface and Swiftwind, take whomever you like for two hunting patrols. I'll take a hunting patrol. With me will be Hopeflame, Whitestorm, Tawnypelt, Ravenflight, Breezetail, and Soarpaw."

Brambleclaw led the way out of camp with Hopeflame at his flank. She could feel Breezetail's eyes burning into her. Like others, she probably blamed her for the Merge. In reality, she had played such a small part in it. She was only the messenger.

"Where are we going to hunt?" Hopeflame asked Brambleclaw.

"We're going to Sunningrocks," Brambleclaw answered.

The group padded on silently through the forest with Brambleclaw in the lead. At the rear of the patrol was Whitestorm. Hopeflame fell back slightly to allow Tawnypelt to talk with her brother. It's been a while since Hopeflame's talked with Tawnypelt; they needed to catch up soon.

Hopeflame found herself walking alongside Ravenflight. He had only been a kit during the ShadowClan Merge. It left Hopeflame to wonder how much he remembered. She wanted to ask him, but was unsure. Then she decided to ask anyways.

"Ravenflight, how much do you remember of ShadowClan?" Hopeflame asked him gently.

The young black tom glanced at her in surprise. "Not much," He admitted. "I honestly don't feel like a ShadowClan cat. I feel like a TigerClan cat."

His answer soothed Hopeflame's worries. She trotted ahead to walk just behind Tawnypelt and Brambleclaw. Up ahead, she could hear the river. Her spirits rose, causing her to race ahead of the patrol. She emerged from the trees to stand alongside Sunningrocks. Ahead of them, half frozen over, was the river. It's been a while since she's seen it.

Hopeflame took a step forward but paused. Someday she would be able to return to the river, but not now. Not so soon. She needed more time to grieve that part of her life and those that died with it.

"Hopeflame, you find anything?" Brambleclaw called from the tree line.

"Nope." She turned and bounded back into the shelter of the trees. The patrol was waiting in a clearing. Hopeflame appeared through the undergrowth, earning a shower of snow from the branches.

"Hopeflame," Brambleclaw waved her over. "You're going to train Soarpaw today. She needs to learn how to hunt in the trees. Whitestorm, if you could teach Breezetail? Everyone else spread out like normal."

Everyone dispersed except for Hopeflame and Soarpaw. Whitestorm took Breezetail deeper into the forest. Hopeflame glanced at the black and white apprentice apprehensively. Soarpaw's blue eyes were cold as ice.

"Alright, forest hunting..." Hopeflame cleared her throat. "Well, for one, you won't need to run as far. You're able to sneak up much closer to your prey than you would on the moors. Watch me."

She demonstrated the proper hunting crouch to use in the forest. Her body moved like a snake, fluid and silent. Then she pounced on a leaf. Hopeflame looked back at Soarpaw and nodded for her to try it.

The former WindClan apprentice was a quick learner. She seemed to have an eye for it and a natural balance about her. Soarpaw made it look like a dance, graceful and strong. She looked back to Hopeflame for approval.

"Great job!" Hopeflame purred. "Now let's try it for real."

Soarpaw disappeared into the undergrowth and Hopeflame shadowed her. Almost immediately, Soarpaw locked her blue gaze on a mole. Step by step, she moved in closer to her prey. Hopeflame silently urged her onward. She was doing so well!

Suddenly, the wind shifted and the mole lifted its head abruptly. It must've smelled Soarpaw because it took off. Before Hopeflame could say anything, Soarpaw was chasing after it. Hopeflame jumped to her paws to pursue the apprentice.

"Soarpaw, wait up!" Hopeflame called. Up ahead she could hear the river and Soarpaw wouldn't know that it was there. Just as Hopeflame emerged by Sunningrocks, she watched Soarpaw follow the mole out onto the precariously thin ice. "No Soarpaw!" Hopeflame shouted.

The ice cracked, plunging Soarpaw into the frigid waters. Hopeflame charged down the river bank just as the rest of the patrol appeared at the tree line. They must've heard her screams.

"Hopeflame!" Brambleclaw yowled, but it was too late. She dived into the river.

Chapter 26

[image]

The frigid water stole the air right from Hopeflame's lungs. She opened her eyes and saw Soarpaw further downstream. Soarpaw never swam before and could easily drown. Without another thought, Hopeflame swam under the ice towards Soarpaw.

Soarpaw's inexperienced strides were doing nothing to help her and she was sinking further down. Hopeflame swam as fast as she could but the coldness was working against her. Her legs were starting to become numb, making it harder to swim. She reached for Soarpaw, but the apprentice slipped out of her reach.

Hopeflame, filled with a new determination, cut through the water like a natural-born RiverClan cat. She dug her fangs into Soarpaw's scruff, accidentally drawing a little blood. But she refused to loosen her grip. She wouldn't risk losing the apprentice to the strong current.

Swimming against the current proved more challenging, but Hopeflame was determined. While she held onto Soarpaw, she was reminded of the time Graystripe saved her from the river. He had risked his life to save her. Now she would do the same for Soarpaw. Hopeflame decided that she's caused too many deaths already.

Finally, Hopeflame reached the break in the ice where Soarpaw fell through. The black and white she-cat was unconscious which made it more difficult. She grabbed onto the ice with her front paws and dug her claws in. Brambleclaw and Whitestorm appeared out of nowhere. They hauled Soarpaw up and Breezetail appeared to drag her back to land.

They were about to grab her when her claws slipped and the current dragged her down. Hopeflame hit her head everything went black.

~*~

Light danced at the edges of her vision. There was a gentle breeze that stirred her fur and brought the smells of the forest to her nose. She could feel the sun on her fur, warming her. Hopeflame never wanted to move from this spot.

"Hopeflame, wake up."

Her eyelids fluttered at the sound of the voice. It was vaguely familiar. She stirred slightly, but didn't fully open her eyes. She was so tired...

"Hopeflame!"

Her eyes snapped open in surprise. She found herself staring at a pair of gray paws. Looking up, she gasped when she saw who stood over her.

Graystripe.

His amber eyes were bright and lively like they used to be. He had no blood on his pelt nor scars marking his body. Graystripe looked strong and healthy. He looked happy.

"Graystripe?" Hopeflame stood up on wobbly legs. "Is it really you?"

"Yes," Graystripe purred. He reached out to nuzzle her cheek. "Great StarClan I miss you, you and Featherstream."

"I-Is this StarClan?" Hopeflame's voice shook with fear. Then she realized something terrifying. "Am I dead?!"

"No, you're not dead, but we haven't much time." Graystripe touched his nose to hers and she felt warmth spread across her body. "Listen to me: when you wake up , go to the Moonstone."

Hopeflame backed up, shaking her head. "No, StarClan isn't real! This isn't real. You're only a figment of my imagination."

"StarClan is real, Hopeflame." Graystripe growled, "Tigerstar lies. He always does."

"Why do I need to go to the Moonstone?" Hopeflame wondered.

Graystripe opened his mouth to speak, but then she felt herself being

jerked awake and everything began to fade.

~*~

"Hopeflame!"

Water spluttered out of her mouth as coughs racked her body. Hopeflame sat herself up suddenly and coughed up more water. Her body was shaking and icicles clung to her fur. Brambleclaw was at her side as was Mapleheart.

"We need to get her back to camp." Another cat meowed. It sounded like Runningnose.

"Come on, Hopeflame," Brambleclaw urged her. "Lean on me." Mapleheart appeared at her other side. With the two of them supporting her, the patrol slowly made its way back to camp. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Soarpaw being carried on Whitestorm's strong shoulders.

"I-Is she okay?" Hopeflame rasped just as a cough erupted from her shivering frame.

"She'll be fine," Brambleclaw told her. "Focus on walking."

Before long, the patrol appeared in the TigerClan camp. All of the healers were gathered around Hopeflame and Soarpaw. She was still shivering and the crowding didn't help with the shock.

"Everyone back up!" That voice was Brambleclaw's.

"Come on, Hopeflame," Mapleheart led her back to the healers den while Whitestorm carried Soarpaw.

The healer den was sheltered from the wind and snow. Makeshift nests made out of moss were ready for Hopeflame and Soarpaw. Hopeflame was laid down in one of the nests. The four healers, Barkface, Mudfur, Runningnose, and Mapleheart, were kept busy. Brambleclaw remained at Hopeflame's side while Tawnyfur was at Soarpaw's side.

"Soarpaw will need yarrow for sure," Barkface rasped. "Hopeflame

might need some too. After that we'll give them both coltsfoot and tansy."

"They need to be warmed," Mudfur added. "Lick their fur the wrong way."

Only half-conscious, Hopeflame could feel two tongues combing her coat. Mapleheart appeared in front of her with a foul-smelling herb. "Eat this." Hopeflame chewed the herb and swallowed it. Almost immediately she started puking up whatever water remained.

A few moments later, Runningnose offered her two different herbs. She ate them and almost immediately fell asleep. Before she dozed off, she could hear Brambleclaw's voice speaking to her.

"I won't let you die, Hopeflame." He promised. His breath was warm on her face. "I don't know what I'd do without you..."

Then she fell asleep.

Chapter 27

[image]

Hopeflame woke up sometime during the night in a sweat. Her eyes snapped open only to be greeted with the darkness of night. Brambleclaw was fast asleep beside her, his chest rising and falling ever so softly. She watched him for a moment, amazed by the absolute serenity.

"Don't wake him." Hopeflame nearly jumped out of her fur at the sudden voice. Stepping from the darkest shadows was Mapleheart. Her ginger and white tabby pelt made her appear like half a ghost in the dark. "He only just fell asleep. He's...he's been keeping an eye on you."

Hopeflame glanced at Brambleclaw just as he snored softly. She leaned over and licked his cheek delicately. Then she looked back at Mapleheart who was watching them with deep fascination. It's been a while since the two sisters have been alone together. Last time it hadn't ended well.

"I'm sorry for scratching you," Hopeflame admitted. "I don't know what came over me."

"I understand," Mapleheart murmured. The small she-cat came to sit beside her in the dimness. "Brambleclaw seems to really care for you."

Hopeflame smiled and warmth spilled from her heart. "I love him."

"Even after everything that Tigerstar made you do?" Mapleheart stared at her in profound confusion. "He is Tigerstar's son."

"That doesn't mean that he is Tigerstar," Hopeflame reminded her. "He's...different. When I'm around him, I feel invincible. He makes me brave."

"You were brave before, Hopeflame." Mapleheart mewed softly. She

stood up to walk away. "Get some more sleep."

Hopeflame curled up tighter in her nest and closed her eyes. She could hear Brambleclaw's soft snoring and the raspy breath of Soarpaw. Sleep enveloped her like a shadow. Soon she was unconscious again.

~*~

Hopeflame opened her green eyes to find the healer den empty except for her and Soarpaw. The apprentice was still sleeping, but she looked better than she did. It made Hopeflame feel good that she was able to save her. No one else on that patrol could've swam to fetch her. She silently thanked Graystripe for teaching her those valuable skills.

A shadow fell across the den. Brambleclaw stood silhouetted against the bright light. He dropped the mouse he had in his jaws to bound over to her. "Hopeflame, you're awake!"

They nuzzled each other and their purrs filled the healer den. Hopeflame still felt a little chilled, but she knew that she would be alright. Especially with Brambleclaw at her side.

"I was so worried about you." Brambleclaw murmured. "If anything happened to you..."

"I'm alright, Brambleclaw." She assured him softly. "I'm right here."

For what felt like forever, they stayed like that. Hopeflame felt that if she let go of him, he'd disappear. She never wanted to lose him. Not ever. Brambleclaw's presence calmed her.

"I brought you a mouse." Brambleclaw padded over to pick up the mouse from where he dropped it. "I thought, I don't know, that you might be hungry?"

At the thought of food, Hopeflame's stomach growled. Brambleclaw set the mouse at her paws and she wasted no time tearing into it. The mouse was still somewhat warm-someone had recently caught it. She finished it quickly and then laid her head down. Her body was exhausted after yesterday.

"I had a dream while I was unconscious," Hopeflame stated suddenly as the memory popped up. She could still remember the feel of Graystripe's fur, the look in his eyes... It had felt so real, almost as if it hadn't been a dream at all.

"Yeah? What about?" Brambleclaw wondered as he settled down at her side.

Hopeflame took a deep breath. "I dreamed about Graystripe."

A couple heartbeats passed before Brambleclaw said anything. "Really? What'd he say?"

"That he missed me and Featherstream." Hopeflame snuggled closer to Brambleclaw so she could enjoy his warmth. "He kept talking about the Moonstone for some reason. Then I woke up."

"The Moonstone?" Brambleclaw glanced at her with confusion. "Why would he want you to visit the Moonstone? It's just a glowing rock in a cave."

Hopeflame shrugged. "He made it sound important." She laid her head on Brambleclaw's front paws. He gently licked her forehead. "I miss him. And Stormblaze." She suddenly raised her eyes to him. There was great pain in her eyes. "Is it my fault that Stormblaze is dead?"

"No," Brambleclaw replied strongly. "He made his choice, and that choice was to save you from traitors."

Hopeflame signed and laid her head back down. "Featherstream says that I should be dead instead of Stormblaze." She was starting to feel kind of loopy, probably because of the traumatic events yesterday. "She blames me, lots of cats do."

"None of this is your fault, Hopeflame." Brambleclaw whispered as she started to drift off. "You did what you had to for your clan."

"I didn't do it for the clan," Hopeflame said as her eyes closed. "I did it for you..."

Then she was asleep once more.

Chapter 28

[image]

"Your chest sounds clear and your coughing has stopped." Mapleheart mewed. "I think you'll be alright to return to warrior duties, but you need to take it easy! No dawn patrols, no hunting on the other side of the territory. Take it slow."

"Thanks Mapleheart," Hopeflame purred. She touched her nose to her sister's in joy. "You're a great healer, you know that right?"

Mapleheart giggled, "I've been told that a time or two." It felt amazing to hear her laugh. While Hopeflame's been away, she missed watching her sister blossom into a confident, capable she-cat.

"I'm going to go tell Brambleclaw!" Hopeflame emerged from the healer den just as Tigerstar leaped onto the Great Rock.

"Let all those who can fight like a warrior gather here beneath the Great Rock for a clan meeting!" Tigerstar yowled.

Hopeflame noticed Brambleclaw sitting at the base of the Great Rock with the advisors at his side. Cats gathered around to hear whatever it was Tigerstar had to say. Hopeflame wandered over to Tawnypelt, Owlgaze, and Rowanclaw. "Can I sit here?" Tawnypelt nodded and Hopeflame sat beside her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hopeflame noticed Darkflower and Runningwind leading their three kits out of the nursery. Ebonykit led the way with eagerness. Pinekit walked at his flank and Smallkit trailed behind them. They must being named apprentices!

"These three kits have waited long enough to be named apprentices. Today they will begin their journey to becoming warriors. As the first real TigerClan cats, this is a monumental day for our clan." Tigerstar leaped down from the Great Rock to stand in front of the kits.

"Smallkit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Smallpaw. Your mentor will be Sorreltail." Hopeflame watched the small tabby she-kit approach Sorreltail. They would be a good match.

Tigerstar then moved to Pinekit. "Until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Pinepaw. Brambleclaw, you're a strong, loyal TigerClan warrior and my most faithful deputy. I trust that you will train Pinepaw into a warrior the clan can celebrate."

The young russet tabby tom walked up to Brambleclaw and sheepishly touched hoses with him. It warmed Hopeflame's heart to see Brambleclaw with the young cat. He would be a great mentor, she knew for certain.

"And finally, Ebonykit." Tigerstar walked up to the excited black tom. "Until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Ebonypaw." His amber eyes fell on her. "Hopeflame, you've done more for TigerClan than any other warrior. Your first apprentice is long overdue. You're loyal and have unique skills you learnt from all four clans. I trust that you'll turn Ebonypaw into the ultimate warrior."

Still shocked, Hopeflame stepped forward to touch noses with the small black tom. His green eyes were alight with excitement. She couldn't believe that she would get to train this apprentice. He was so lively and determined. It would certainly be fun to train him.

"Smallpaw! Pinepaw! Ebonypaw!" The clan cheered.

Hopeflame couldn't help but noticing Ebonypaw stand a little taller. She turned to him when the cheering faded. "What do you want to see first? I was thinking we could cover about half the territory before sunset."

"Why don't Pinepaw and I come along?" Brambleclaw suggested with Pinepaw at his side. "It'll be fun."

Brambleclaw led the way out of camp with Hopeflame at his side. The two brothers spoke excitedly to one another. They reminded Hopeflame of her and her littermates. It seemed like lifetimes ago,

but they had been best friends once.

"So Mapleheart gave you the okay to train again?" Brambleclaw asked her.

"Yes, but she says I need to take it easy." Hopeflame replied cheekily. She rubbed against Brambleclaw's side and caught his eye.

"Hey! Lovebirds!" It was Ebonypaw. The black tom certainly didn't lack confidence. "Where are we heading?"

Hopeflame and Brambleclaw shared amused looks. "We'll head to Snackrocks." Brambleclaw decided.

The two apprentices dashed off, leaving Hopeflame and Brambleclaw alone for a moment. They glanced at each other, and it seemed like they were the only ones who existed. Hopeflame loved Brambleclaw, she knew that. She knew that when he became leader, TigerClan would change for the better.

~*~

The sun was beginning to set when they returned to Fourtrees. Ebonypaw and Pinepaw eagerly joined the other apprentices to talk about all they've learned. They wrestled with their sister.

Hopeflame watched them for a little while. She became lost in her thoughts and didn't notice Brambleclaw coming up beside her. His sudden appearance caused her to jump. "You scared me!"

"Sorry," Brambleclaw mewed. "I was wondering if you wanted to share a rabbit?"

She touched her nose to his. "I'd love to."

Together, they approached the fresh-kill pile which was overflowing. TigerClan really was thriving. Brambleclaw picked out a rabbit then they sat side by side in front of the deputy's den. While they ate, Hopeflame's eyes kept moving back towards the apprentices. She wished that her apprenticeship could've been less stressful.

There was sudden motion at the nursery. Hopeflame watched as Brightflower's four kits emerged into the light. They were all so small and tentative, but so brave at the same time. Any kit could be brave with their littermates at their side.

"We could have kits, you know." Brambleclaw meowed thoughtfully. "Imagine little kits that look like you running around."

"They would look like you, too!" Hopeflame argued playfully, her eyes alight with laughter.

Brambleclaw chuckled and licked between her ears. "I would love them regardless."

They ate the rabbit and playfully talked about their future lives together. Hopeflame imagined what their kits would look. She imagined little tabby toms and red-furred she-kits. Oh the stories she would tell them.

She laid by Brambleclaw's side in their new den. Hopeflame fell asleep listening to his heartbeat.

Chapter 29

[image]

Pinkish light streamed into the den, indicating that dawn had come. Hopeflame slowly opened her eyes to take in the sight. Outside the den, she could faintly make out the clearing. She realized quickly that Brambleclaw wasn't at her side. He was probably leading the dawn patrol.

Unable to fall back asleep, Hopeflame sat up in her nest. She began to groom her long fur which contrasted with the snow outside. Her green eyes flitted over to the entrance in curiosity. Outside the den, she could hear giggling.

Rising to her paws, Hopeflame emerged from the den to investigate. She followed the sound to find Brightflower's four kits playing at the edge of the clearing. They were rolling in the snow, giggling and chasing the snowflakes. Hopeflame's gaze softened and warmth spread in her heart.

Sandstorm told her that Brightflower's and Swiftwind named them Beekit, Spottedkit, Leafkit, and Gingerkit. They all shared some resemblance with their parents. Each of them looked strong and healthy. Perfect future warriors for TigerClan.

Leafkit, a black and white tom-the perfect image of Swiftwind, looked over at her and stopped playing. The other kits stopped playing for a moment and studied her curiously. Out of the four of them, only one seemed brave enough to approach her.

It was Gingerkit. She walked towards Hopeflame, one small step at a time. Soon she stood right in front of Hopeflame. She tipped her head in wonder.

"You're Hopeflame, right?" Gingerkit squeaked. "The one that spied on RiverClan and WindClan?"

Hopeflame was speechless. Did she really want the kits to know her

only as the cat who deceived two entire clans? Slowly, Hopeflame nodded. "Yes, that would be me."

"Wow!" Gingerkit exclaimed. "You're like a hero!" The other kits gathered around her and attacked her with questions.

"Were you scared?" "What did fish taste like?" "Was it fun being a spy?"

Hopeflame opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She didn't know what to say. Before she could respond, Sandstorm appeared at her side.

"Come on, kits. Run along." Sandstorm ordered them. They bounded back towards the nursery, leaving Hopeflame and Sandstorm isolated in the clearing.

"They think that I enjoyed being a spy." Hopeflame choked out. She didn't realize it, but she was shaking. "They think being a deceiver is heroic."

Sandstorm nuzzled Hopeflame reassuringly. "They're just kits, Hopeflame. They don't know any better. When you have kits of your own, you'll understand."

Hopeflame sighed and let her eyes wander over to the apprentice den. "I need to take Ebonypaw out for training."

She left Sandstorm standing there alone. Hopeflame approached the apprentice den to find Ebonypaw waiting inside. He perked up when he saw her coming.

"What are we going to do today, Hopeflame?" Ebonypaw asked her. He pounced on a snowflake. "Hunting?" Then he clawed at an imaginary foe. "Fighting?"

Hopeflame's whiskers twitched in amusement. "We'll be practicing basic defensive moves today." She led the black tom out of camp and towards the moors.

He flattened his ears. "We're going out onto the moors?"

Hopeflame glanced at him with a frown. "You need to learn how to be comfortable in all situations."

They stopped near the Lookout Rock. Almost immediately, Hopeflame lunged at Ebonypaw. He wasn't prepared which made it easy for her to pin him down. "You need to always stay alert." She let him up and saw the embarrassment on his face.

"Now, this time when I lunge at you, try to dodge me, okay?" Hopeflame told him. When he nodded, she dashed forward at him. Ebonypaw tried to dodge, but she was quicker than he was and easily tagged him. "You'll have to be quicker than that. Try anticipating my movements."

They practiced that for a little while. Ebonypaw improved each time. He was becoming quicker on his paws and more in tune to her movements. Hopeflame was quite pleased with him. He was a quick learner, very intelligent.

"Alright, let's try something new." Hopeflame thought for a moment. "This time, when I attack you, try to defend yourself. Ready?"

Hopeflame lunged at him with her paw outstretched. Ebonypaw moved slightly and struck her shoulder from the side. She turned back to him to find a pleased look on his face. "Good," Hopeflame purred. "Again."

They practiced until the sun was high in the sky. By that time, both of them were tired and hungry. Hopeflame led them back to Fourtrees. Ebonypaw talked nonstop about what he learned which increased Hopeflame's affection for the young tom. He would be a great warrior one day.

When they returned to camp, they were met with a lot of commotion. Warriors were circled around two cats whom Hopeflame couldn't see. She pushed to the front of the crowd to see her brother, Free, fighting with Jaggedtooth. The two toms were locked in a vicious battle. Fur was flying and blood splattered the snow.

"Hey! Quit it!" Hopeflame was the only one to intervene.

She forced herself in between the two toms, receiving a few marks along her pelt. Her efforts must've pulled some others from their trance because Whitestorm and Dustpelt were at her side to help pull the toms apart.

Where was Tigerstar?

"What's going on here?!" Whitestorm demanded the two toms.

Hopeflame narrowed her eyes at Free. How could he be so stupid to start a fight? Tigerstar was already waiting for him to mess up!

"He started it!" Free growled, motioning at Jaggedtooth. "He called me a loner!"

"Aren't you?" Whitestorm snapped. "You're not a full TigerClan cat yet!"

"Free, what were you thinking?" Hopeflame questioned her brother. She tried to approach him, but he took a step back.

"Don't touch me."

Hopeflame's jaw dropped and she was frozen in place. She didn't even move when Barkface, Runningnose, and Mapleheart appeared. Mapleheart had to snap her out of it.

"Healer den. Now."

She allowed herself to be led towards the healer den with Jaggedtooth and Free. Hopeflame wondered what Tigerstar would do when he found out.

Chapter 30

[image] [image]

Inside the healer den, away from the clan's prying eyes, Hopeflame could think clearly. Barkface was seeing to Free's wounds while Runningnose cared for Jaggedtooth. Hopeflame saw that Free was missing clumps of fur and he had blood dripping from his face. Jaggedtooth looked pretty torn up too.

Mapleheart turned Hopeflame's head away with her tail. "Don't focus on them. Where did you get clawed?" She had a deep focus in her eyes that Hopeflame marveled. How had Mapleheart, her once sickly sister, grown into such a confident she-cat?

"On my shoulder, maybe my stomach." Hopeflame answered.

While Mapleheart started chewing up a poultice, Hopeflame glanced back at Free. Barkface was cleaning the blood from his face with some wet moss. She imagined Tigerstar barging into the den at any moment to drag Free off for execution. That couldn't happen, she wouldn't allow it.

She refused to lose another brother.

Suddenly, her wounds stung causing Hopeflame to flinch. "Sorry, it might hurt for a little bit." Mapleheart mewed. She dabbed more of the sticky green poultice onto Hopeflame's wounds. After a while, the herbs caused a cooling sensation. "There, that should do it."

Mapleheart took more of the poultice and applied it to the rest of her wounds, one being on her stomach. Hopeflame flattened her ears in discomfort until the soothing effects kicked in. She laid her head down on the moss, clearly exhausted.

Hopeflame watched both Jaggedtooth and Free leave the den with their wounds patched up with cobwebs. Runningnose and Barkface also left the den, probably to go find Tigerstar. She started to get up to go after them, but Mapleheart placed a strong paw on her

shoulder to prevent her from it.

Confused, Hopeflame looked up at her sister. "What?"

Mapleheart's green eyes were shining for whatever reason. "Does Brambleclaw know?"

Thoroughly confused, Hopeflame frowned. "Know what?" She sat up and stared her sister in the eye. What was up with her?

"Hopeflame," Mapleheart's voice rose with excitement. "You're pregnant."

At first, Hopeflame didn't comprehend what her sister said. She simply stared at her with a blank expression. Pregnant? It started to sink in and Hopeflame started to feel a little wobbly.

"I-I'm pregnant?" Hopeflame's voice shook.

Mapleheart nodded. "You're going to have kits! Does Brambleclaw know? They are his, right?"

Hopeflame's mind flew back to that one night...that one wonderful night they spent together in the forest. Kits. Her and Brambleclaw were having kits! She felt overwhelmed, so she laid back down.

"Yes, they're his." Hopeflame smiled to herself. "I'm having kits..."

"Yes, well, you should probably let him know," Mapleheart giggled. She started putting away her supplies and tidying up the healer den.

Hopeflame couldn't move. After everything she's been through, every test Tigerstar's given her, she could finally get what she wanted. She could have a life with Brambleclaw, a family. These kits were proof of that.

With sudden urgency, Hopeflame jumped to her paws. "I have to tell Brambleclaw!" She left the den in a hurry and almost collided with Barkface. "Sorry!"

Her eyes scanned the clearing, but she didn't see him anywhere. Was he still out on patrol?! Suddenly, there was motion at the camp

entrance. Brambleclaw entered with Leopardfur, Longtail, Dawncloud, Ravenflight, and Pinepaw. His amber eyes immediately found her and he hurried to her side.

"I heard that you were hurt so I ran back as quick as I could. Are you okay?" Brambleclaw rambled on and on about nonsense things which only amused Hopeflame.

"Brambleclaw, I'm fine," She assured him with a giggle.

He stared at her in confusion. "But Runningnose said that you got in the middle of a fight with Jaggedtooth and Free? I ought to talk to those two..." Brambleclaw started to walk off angrily, but Hopeflame blocked his path.

"It can wait," Hopeflame promised him. "Do you want to go into our den to talk? There's something I need to tell you."

Brambleclaw narrowed his eyes. "Did Tigerstar say something to you?"

Hopeflame snorted and rolled her eyes. "I don't care what Tigerstar says. Now come on."

She led the way into their den with Brambleclaw right behind her. The den was cozy and offered some privacy from the rest of the clan. They sat down in their nests facing each other. Hopeflame could see the worry on Brambleclaw's face.

"Well, what is it?"

Hopeflame smiled cheekily at him. "Well, do you remember that night we spent together in the forest?"

Brambleclaw chuckled and moved closer so that their fur was brushing. "Of course, how could I ever forget?"

She twined her tail with his, enjoying their closeness. "And you remember how we slept underneath the stars?"

"Yes," Brambleclaw replied softly.

"Well," Hopeflame withdrew her tail to curl it protectively around her stomach. "I'm expecting kits."

Almost immediately, Brambleclaw's amber eyes lit up. His jaw dropped and he stared at her in awe. "Kits? Really?"

Hopeflame purred. "Yes, really."

Brambleclaw embraced her so that his chin rested atop her head. She curled in closer against his chest so that she could hear his heartbeat. It was racing faster than the river. They stayed like that for what felt like a lifetime. Then, Brambleclaw spoke: "I'm going to be a father..."

"And I a mother," Hopeflame murmured. "This is everything we've ever wanted."

"Every day, Hopeflame, I look at you and wonder how I could ever deserve you." His eyes were locked with hers. They held such an intensity that Hopeflame couldn't look away. "And now you're going to be the mother of my kits...I couldn't imagine anything better."

Hopeflame rubbed her head beneath his chin, purring. "I love you, Brambleclaw."

"I love you, too, Hopeflame," Brambleclaw purred. "And I always will."

Sequel

Ah! The second book of 'Hopestar's Choice' is finally complete! To all of my readers: thank you. Your support makes writing all the more worthwhile. So buckle down because book three is where it gets bumpy...